

TO HEIR IS HUMAN

IN CRIME



a Kat Makris
Greek Mafia
novel

ALEX A.
KING

In Crime

A Kat Makris Novel

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*For my crazy Greek family, who make my characters seem comparatively
sane*

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Also by Alex A. King

Chapter 1

I WAS three the first time I asked for a baby sister and the first time my father said, “Ha-ha-no.” By the time I submitted my umpteenth request on my eighth birthday, his answer hadn’t changed.

“Everyone I know has a sister,” I complained, in preliminary training for the but-everyone-else-is-doing-it days that were to come in my teens. “Or a puppy. If you guys won’t buy me a sister, can we get a dog?”

The place was our kitchen. The time was spring. A two-faced Portland spring, where we’d get slapped with hot sun one day, then kicked in the face with a downpour the next. Dad was at home and Mom wasn’t dead yet.

I was loved.

But not loved enough for them to pony up the baby sister. DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince were right about parents and their lack of understanding.

“Tell her,” Mom said across the table.

Dad gave her two palms-up. “I don’t want to tell her.”

I plunked my elbows on the table, cupped my chin in my hands. “Tell me what?”

“The thing I do not want to tell you.”

Even at eight-years-old I could have told you his logic had no logic in it. Long-dead philosophers rolled in their dusty graves—except maybe Empedocles, who jumped into Mount Etna, where he came to a boiling and bubbling end.

“Which thing?” I asked.

He made a face, waved his hands, Greek-style. “The thing.”

My eyes narrowed as I hunted for a loose end to pull. “Is this about Santa Claus? Because I already know he’s not real. Ditto the Easter Bunny and Tooth Fairy.”

Dad looked at Mom. “Thank God. Think of the fortune we will save on presents this Christmas.”

“Think of all the money we’ll spend on therapy later, though,” Mom said.

“I bet Baboulas isn’t real either,” I said, referencing the villain in all Dad’s bedtime stories. Baboulas was part monster (which was really saying something, given the genetic abnormalities featured in Greek Mythology), part terrorist, part avenging dark angel, and all boogeyman. In his stories, Baboulas had eyes and ears in places no

eyes or ears should exist. “You mean like how crickets have ears on the knees, and butterflies taste with their feet?” I asked him once. “Don’t be silly,” he’d said. “How can anything taste with its feet, eh? That is what a mouth is for.”

Pointing to his mouth now, Dad said, “Listen to me. Baboulas is worse than real.” He tapped his head. “Baboulas lives in here.” Tapped his heart. “And in here. And also in a dirty hole in the ground.”

I’d heard it all before. “Back to the thing. Tell meeeeeee.” Patience wasn’t my strong suit, then or ever. I was positively humming on my chair.

“You are enough for us, Katerina. One perfect child, eh?”

“Is that a cop-out? Because that sounds like a cop-out.”

Mom nodded. “Total cop-out. You’re a coward, Mike.”

“Maybe I am,” he said. “But I am a coward who is alive.”

For ten-year-old me, life was always shinier when I had new shoes. Grown-up me hadn’t changed much. Today I had new shoes: pretty yellow espadrilles with ballerina ribbons that tied around my ankles, and life was looking pretty shiny, mostly because I was staring up at the sun, thinking, *Why me? Jesus freakin’ Christ on a cow, why me?*

Something hard poked me in the back. “Walk,” Marika said. “And do not say anything. You promised, remember?”

Marika is my cousin’s, cousin’s, cousin’s wife. She’s built like mama bear’s bed in *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, all squishy pillows and soft blankets. In contrast, her husband Takis’ biggest ass is on his head. If he could make his pants reach that far he’d never need a belt. When she’s not on the job as my backup bodyguard, Marika dresses like an explosion in a florist shop. Her heart is made of molten gold, and these days she carries a huge bucket handbag stuffed with guns she barely knows how to use.

“I don’t want to,” I said.

“This is easy. Very easy. A child could do it.”

I glanced back over my shoulder. “You have children. They could do it.”

She jabbed me again. “All you have to do is go inside, get the thing off the shelf, and give it to the man behind the counter.”

“I don’t think he needs it.”

“You are very funny—almost as funny as that one comedian.”

“Which one?” Because that was kind of important. No one wanted to be one of the new crop of hipster comedians whose idea of comedy was yet another coffee shop anecdote about how the barista at

Starbucks wrote their name wrong on the cup.

"One of the not-funny ones. Hurry up because I need to pee. I had three frappes this morning and my bladder is about to explode."

"You couldn't have had just one?"

"You have met my children, yes? Would you face them without all that coffee?"

I didn't want to face Marika's kids at all. Marika and Takis had a handful of sons who would take over the world someday. Unfortunately they'd take it over in a *Planet of the Apes* kind of way, one banana at a time.

"Nobody I know better see me," I muttered.

"That is why we came to Volos."

"Then why don't you buy it yourself?"

"Just go," she said. "It will be over before you know it."

She sounded reasonable for a woman holding an ice cream in each hand and a box of cakes stashed in her bucket-sized shoulder bag. I sighed and skulked into the drugstore alone.

A doorbell jangled overhead. Dust stirred. On the shelves, products inched toward—and surpassed, in some cases—their Best By dates. The windows quietly begged for some one-on-one time with Windex and a paper towel. Behind the counter a man in a white coat was silently judging me over the rim of his wire glasses. Why was he judging me? He didn't even know me. For all he knew I was in his store for something totally innocuous, like Band-Aids. I wasn't, but I could have been.

I snatched a pink box off the shelf, scurried to the counter.

"This isn't for me," I said.

"What for do I care? All I want is your money."

"Someone told me to buy it." I flung a desperate look over my shoulder at Marika, who was pacing on the sidewalk outside, alternating licks between ice cream cones. Some bodyguard she was—although her bodyguard status was probably dependent on the outcome of the pregnancy test I was attempting to purchase for her. "It's for a friend."

"Everyone who buys one of these buys it for a friend. There is no friend—only you." The cashier dropped the pink box in a see-through plastic bag. His gaze slid to my bare fingers. "No wedding ring, eh?"

"I thought you didn't care."

"Caring is one thing. Judging is another, *Despinida* Makri."

Great. Just fan-freaking-tastic. So much for anonymity. Since I'd been the in newspaper, linked to my grandmother, A.K.A. Baboulas, A.K.A. Greece's most notorious mob boss, I had less and less privacy every day. People I didn't know knew my face.

I snatched the bag off the counter, dropped the money in its place.

“Keep the change.”

“There is no change.”

“Well then consider it a tip for your oh-so excellent service.”

There was movement behind me, the kind that happens just before something truly awful happens. Movement like this occurred that November day in Dallas on the grassy knoll. It happened again outside The Dakota apartment building when Mark Chapman decided to imagine a world without Lennon in it. And it was happening again today.

To me.

I turned around and looked right into the eyes of Dina, the girlfriend Dad had abandoned when he made his escape to the United States. Her gaze cut straight to the bag in my hand, where Marika’s pregnancy test was advertising itself, on account of how the bag was transparent.

“It’s not for me,” I said, preemptively striking.

Dina was a tallish garden gnome of a woman, all hips, boobs, and a waist as thick as her head. The woman’s entire wardrobe was black; she’d been in mourning since Dad dumped her without formally dumping her. Her home was a shrine to my father. Her life was dedicated to his memory. That he’d married my mother and had me was just a temporary blip, as far as she was concerned. We were the shit that happens, Mom and I.

“I say nothing,” she said, all evidence to the contrary. “But know that I am silently judging you.”

“How silent can you be if you’re doing it out loud?”

Her chin jutted out an offended angle, the way only a Greek chin can. “You must get that attitude from your mother. Does your father even know who she was?”

Yikes. Someone must have skipped Sex Ed that day. “It’s not for me,” I repeated.

“Was it Detective Melas?” She leaned into my personal space, plunging me deeper into a lemon-scented hell. “You can tell me.”

“They were in the newspaper together,” the pharmacist said. “I bet it was him. But there was that other one, too, the one carrying her under his arm. A man does not carry a woman like that unless he has stuck his p—”

“Elias,” I hollered.

Like he’d been shot out of a cannon, Elias flew into the shop. His hand wasn’t on his gun, but it was hovering dangerously close. He quickly scanned the area for a threat, then, finding none, relaxed. We were going to have to talk, Elias and I, and redraw the parameters of what I considered a threat.

Elias is my bodyguard. The wiry, thirty-something Greek started

his career as an assassin, but Grandma had offered him a deal he didn't want to refuse. His old boss was dead and the man had to eat. Living at the family compound didn't suck, either. Grandma provides comfortable apartments for family and the handful of employees who live there.

"You okay?" he asked me.

"Can you shoot them?"

He looked Dina and the pharmacist over. "No."

"Are you sure?"

"Baboulas said I am only allowed to shoot people if they are threatening your life."

"They kind of are."

"This is why you have two bodyguards," Marika said, hauling ass into the pharmacy. There was no sign of the two ice creams she'd been licking moments ago, but there was a splotch of chocolate fudge on her shirt. As ravenous as she'd been lately, it wouldn't last long. "Baboulas never put conditions on who I can shoot. Which one do you want me to kill first?" For the next thirty seconds she wrestled with the huge shoulder bag. "I cannot get it out. Never mind, I can shoot them right through the leather. I think this is the barrel down here." She lifted the bottom of the bag, aimed it at the pharmacist. Then she frowned. "No, I think it is up here."

Gaze stuck to the ceiling in the *God help us* position, Elias crossed himself, forehead to chest, shoulder to shoulder.

"You can't shoot me," Dina said. "I am family."

Marika and I gawked at her. Dina was in no way family.

While I was trying to cobble together a pithy comeback, something about how dating Dad and sleeping with Aunt Rita before she became Aunt Rita didn't give Dina family rights, the drugstore door swung open again. The bell chimed.

"Heeeey," the newcomer said. "Is somebody making a party here?"

The groan started in my toes, gathering steam as it paraded through my body, up to my mouth. By the time it emerged it had collected an eye-roll to go with it. The new arrival was Baby Dimitri, Godfather of the Night, Shoes, and Souvenirs. In fact, he'd sold me the espadrilles currently on my feet. He'd even kicked in a discount, seeing as Grandma was in the same industry. Baby Dimitri is one of those sixty-something guys who dresses for Florida in the late 1960's. His shoes were white, the crease on his pants so sharp you could sever a hand. Knowing Baby Dimitri, he'd used them to slice off a limb or two. Today half his face was hidden behind a pair of sunglasses that made him look like Ground Control calling to Major Tom. He hadn't come alone. With him was his sidekick Laki, a walking twig with a penchant for things that went BOOM. Molotov cocktails, mostly.

Possibly also missile launchers.

“Katerina is pregnant,” Dina said.

Baby Dimitri beamed. He held up both hands. “I came here for my protection money, and what do I get? Good news! Katerina Makris-with-an-S, congratulations! Who is the lucky man?” He grabbed me by the shoulders, kissed both my cheeks. “Tell me, has Baboulas cut off his *pouts* yet? Does he know his life expectancy plummeted the moment he touched you?”

Behind him, Laki grinned. It was the grin of a man who preferred gold to enamel, but couldn’t afford the whole set. “You want me to make fire on him?”

“I’m not pregnant,” I yelped. Stuffing the contraband in my cross-body bag, I gathered up what was left of my dignity and stomped out of the drugstore.

The sun bored into my skull via my eye sockets. As I was shoving my sunglasses onto my nose, a white van skidded to a halt at the curb. No writing on the side. Too clean to be anything except Bad News. Sure enough, the side door slid open and a banana jumped out and planted herself in front of me, legs slightly apart, hands on hips. The banana’s name was Hera. National Intelligence Service (Greece’s CIA) agent, Detective Melas’ ex-girlfriend, and all-around bitch. She has a face like an angel, a Sports Illustrated body, and she hates my guts. It wasn’t her guts I hated—just her pulse. Today she’d coordinated her outfit with her blonde hair—a yellow jumpsuit I’d last seen in *Kill Bill*, but sleeveless, and with enough cleavage to hide at least seven dwarfs.

My sundress was a similar yellow, but next to Hera’s banana I was more of a Canary melon. Technically I’m proportionate, but Hera is enough to make any woman wish she’d spent her teens cultivating an eating disorder. She’s tall, blonde, skinny, and tan. I’m a brunette with sunburn on my sunburn. Average is my middle name—or could have been, if only my parents were hippies.

I tilted my head slightly. “Do I want to know where you’re hiding your sword?”

“Very funny.” She wiped her gaze up and down my dress. “I heard you were pregnant with Nikos’s baby. When are you having the abortion?”

“Christ on crutches! I’m not pregnant with his baby! I’m not pregnant at all!”

“You’re not?”

“No!”

“Never mind,” she said, and jumped back into the van. The door slammed and the NIS vehicle sped away.

Marika came trotting out behind me, still tussling with the gun in her bag. She eyed the retreating van with a disapproving look.

“What did that one want?”

“She thought I was pregnant with Detective Melas’s baby.”

Marika gasped. Clutched her chest. “You are pregnant with his baby? Why did you not tell me?”

My mouth fell open. A passing bug flew in, realizing its mistake when I began to choke. Marika thumped me on the back.

“Do not eat bugs. I am not certain, but I bet it is not good for the baby. Although maybe the extra protein ...”

“There is no baby!”

“I was in denial the first time, too. And the second. And—”

“This time?”

Her gaze cut to the plastic peeking out the top of my bag. “Heh. I forgot.”

I pulled the box out of my bag, slapped it into her hand. “I didn’t. Take the test.”

“Do you want to get another one for you?”

“I’m not pregnant! I haven’t had sex for so long my hoo-ha has cobwebs and a dusty Gone Dick Fishin’ nailed across the entrance!”

She stared at me, agog. When she recovered she said, “You know what you need? Sex. That will fix your bad mood.”

Wrong. What I needed was to get as far away from my family as humanly possible. I was starting to understand why Dad had bailed on his relatives all those years ago; it wasn’t the crime, it was the crazy. His family members—and mine, by default—were out of their damn minds. I had to find Dad before I wound up in a padded room, eating bugs and muttering about how the Master would be coming for me soon.

My foul mood followed me back to the yellow VW Beetle Grandma had given me to drive while I was here. The Beetle was adorable, but at times like this I really missed my old Jeep. The Jeep was mine, free and clear. No strings. No bugs or tracking devices. I jumped in the driver’s side, listing slightly as Marika dumped herself into the shotgun seat.

“Where are we going now?” Marika asked me as I fired up the ignition. Two car lengths back, Elias eased away from the curb in one of the Family’s black SUVs. Grandma takes security seriously, which is why I have my own bodyguard. Well, two if I counted Marika, although I wasn’t sure if I should. Marika was more like a friend with liabilities.

“Back to the compound so you can take that test.”

“I was thinking we should stop for a little something to eat first.”

“I thought your bladder was about to burst.”

“If we stop I could pee.”

“What about the test?”

“There is always tomorrow.”

Over my dead body was she putting it off another day. This was Greece; I knew how this would go. At this very moment, as I was cruising along the coastal road, phone calls were being made, texts were being sent, possibly news agencies were receiving tips about how the country’s most infamous mob boss’ newly returned—and completely unmarried—granddaughter had been bumping uglies without a raincoat, and was now knocked up. Greece wouldn’t care that it was completely untrue. Here the truth never got in the way of a juicy story. Lies were performance art.

“No. No tomorrow. Only today,” I said, teeth gritted.

She held up both hands. “Okay, okay. We can stop to eat and I will take the test there. Yes?”

As far as ideas went, that didn’t suck. I made a non-committal noise and began considering our dining options. My stomach growled, clearly liking Marika’s plan. Like my hormones, my stomach could be stupid. I pointed the car in the direction of the coast, souvlaki on my mind.

“Katerina,” Marika said after a moment.

“What?”

“Did you know the NIS are following you.”

I glanced in the rearview mirror. Sure enough, a white van had elbowed Elias out of the way and moved into his place.

“Great. Perfect.”

There was a long pause. Then Marika said, “And I think you are also following them, too.”

Damn it, she was right. A second white van was now hogging the space in front of the beetle. I let out of a grunt of annoyance. Freakin’ Hera.

I reached over and grabbed my phone out of my bag, dropped it in Marika’s lap. “Text Grandma. Tell her we’ve got company.”

Marika did as I asked, then we waited. I maintained my position as the filling in a shit sandwich. No, I was something tasty and All-American—peanut butter and jelly. It was the bread that was shitty.

“Anything?”

“Not yet ... Wait.” She flashed the screen at me.

Text message from Xander. One word: Cooperate.

Xander is Grandma’s silent but deadly bodyguard and henchman. For the most part he goes where she goes. Xander is made of concrete blocks and he never speaks. Whether he can’t or just chooses not to, I’m not sure. All I know is that he’s never spoken to me. Xander is also the kind of hot that makes a woman *want* a spanking. Because I’ve spent my whole life avoiding violence, Xander makes me feel conflicted about a lot of things.

Cooperate? Was he high? No way was I about to cooperate with the NIS—not with Hera at the figurative wheel.

Look at me, defying law enforcement. What was going on? A few weeks ago I was a law abiding American citizen who drove the speed limit and always stopped at the zebra crossing outside Wal-Mart. Now my family was the Greek mafia, and I was figuring out the best way to evade Greece's CIA. Greece is that hand basket to hell they warn you about, and I was riding in that basket, chowing down on Grandma's cookies.

My brain blipped, stuttered, rewound. Xander wanted me to cooperate? Was that an order from him personally, or did it come from a higher authority—aka: Grandma. Because if cooperating was all Xander's idea, then maybe I should button my lips and say nothing. It wasn't long ago that I'd discovered Xander carried around an NIS identification card, which, he told me (non verbally, seeing as how Xander didn't speak) was a fake.

But was it really?

Greece confused me.

My life confused me.

I pulled over to feel sorry for myself for a moment. Cooperating was secondary.

The vans came to roost behind and in front of us. There was no sign of Elias, mostly because there was a big van obscuring the rear view.

Marika shot me a horrified look. "What are you doing?"

"Stopping to see what they want."

"Are you crazy? I have a bag full of guns."

Jesus Christ in a camper van, she had a valid point. Were her guns legal? Who knew. Someone probably had a license for them, just not a henchman's wife—bodyguard or no bodyguard. I nudged the Beetle away from the curb and zipped off at a speed slightly lower than the posted sign on this stretch of road. Last thing I wanted was for law enforcement to have a legitimate reason to haul my butt in. Better for them to have a half-assed reason that a lawyer could give them endless legal grief about.

Argh! I was starting to think like my family. At the rate I was going I'd be negotiating with drug suppliers for better percentages by the end of the week.

"What are you doing now?" Marika asked.

"Going back to the compound?"

"Baboulas will kill you if you take the NIS there."

In my family killing someone wasn't an empty threat. Yes, I was her only female grandchild, and yes, I was potentially—if Grandma got her way—heir to the Makris family, uh, Family business, but that

didn't mean she wouldn't make me vanish like a scientologist's uncooperative spouse if she thought it was best for the Family.

"Where am I supposed to go? Is there some kind of procedure for this kind of thing? Because I think there needs to be a formal procedure and a binder explaining all the steps."

"Who knows? I am just a bodyguard. I could call Takis and ask."

I rolled my eyes. If she called her husband he'd take over, and when Takis took over ... Actually, when Takis took over things got done. Not always the way I wanted them to, but he was good at his job. Which was probably why Grandma kept him around. His personality wouldn't be winning any prizes for charm any time soon.

"Try Stavros."

Stavros is my cousin. He has pelt of a bear, and a penchant for porn that may or may not involve animals. Although his job title is technically henchman, he's really just a sweet guy who wants to settle down with a good woman and raise children.

Marika called Stavros. When he picked up she put him on speakerphone.

"I know," Stavros said when we told him about the NIS. "Elias told me."

"Told you when?"

"He's on the other line right now."

"And?"

"And what? We were talking about what I am going to cook for lunch."

Marika perked up. "What are you cooking?"

"Fondant *patates* and herb chicken."

"Fondant *patates*? What are fondant *patates*?" Marika asked.

Patates. Greek potatoes. Exactly the same as American potatoes, but with a different arrangement of vowels.

Stavros explained. When he'd finished, Marika let out a shoulder-shuddering sigh. "Takis would never forgive me if I served a new *patates* recipe. That man wants tiganites with every meal." *Tiganites*. Fries.

"That does sound delicious," I said. "Can we focus on the NIS? Xander told me to cooperate. Should I cooperate?"

"Until they try to stop you, just keep doing whatever you were doing," Stavros said.

"And if they do stop us?"

"Answer their questions honestly and tell them nothing. Technically that is cooperating."

"I don't know anything!"

"Good. I would stick to that." He ended the call.

Marika gave me a hopeful look. "Can we eat now?"

We stopped at a souvlaki joint where Marika loaded up on gyros. I ordered souvlaki and Epsa lemonade. There was nothing like the local-made lemonade back home. While I was paying for us both, Marika vanished.

I trotted back to the Beetle.

No sign of her.

Oh, boy. Was this another kidnapping thing, because I was getting pretty tired of kidnappers and other crazies. Yes, my family was a pack of criminals, but there are levels, or so they kept telling me. Come to think of it, I wasn't sure my family didn't do kidnapping. Abduction seemed like it was probably the most common tool in the criminal toolbox. Want to make the other guy squeal? Take someone who belongs to him.

No more abductions, for crying out loud. Takis would have my head if his wife had been kidnapped and he was forced to stay home with their kids. I wasn't sure he'd make it twenty-four hours with the fruit of his puny loins.

I dumped the food in the car and looked around, hands on hips. The two NIS vans had parked in formation. Behind the rear vehicle, Elias was idling. I trotted over to the black SUV. He stuck his head out the window as I approached.

"Can we head back to the compound?" he said. "I'm going to be late for lunch. Stavros doesn't like it when I'm late for lunch. Today it's fondant *patates*. I don't know what they are but they sound amazing."

"Have you seen Marika?"

"She's not with you?"

"Does she look like she's with me?"

He peered past me. "I would say no. You cannot miss Marika."

That was true enough. Marika was a lot of woman.

I walked to the middle of the narrow street, looked left, looked right. Nothing. Well, not exactly nothing. Plenty of foot traffic in the form of Greeks scurrying towards their homes for lunch (which was really dinner, seeing as how lunch is the main meal of the day around here) and their afternoon naps. America prided itself on being a democracy—well, sort of—but as far as I was concerned my home country deserved a big pointy F for failing to adopt the siesta. Afternoon naps are the best thing ever. Who wouldn't vote for naps?

Just as I was about to yell her name, Marika came dashing out from the grimy alley between buildings.

She eyed my empty hands. "You did not eat my gyro, did you?"

"Where were you?" My voice might have been a touch frantic and

high pitched.

"I had to pee."

"There's a public bathroom down there?"

"No."

I looked at Marika. She looked at me. I tried not to imagine the possibilities.

"Never mind," I said, moving on. "Did you take the test?"

"What test?"

"The pregnancy test."

"Heh. I forgot. Oh well, there is always tomorrow. Where are my gyros?"

Too annoyed to speak, I hooked a thumb at the Beetle. Half of Greece thought I was knocked up now, and the rest wouldn't be far behind. As hot a topic as Grandma was, I'd probably make headline news tonight, and all because Marika had made me promise not to tell anyone she might be pregnant.

Wasting no time, Marika settled into the passenger seat and began rummaging around in the bag of food. "Now that my bladder is empty there is more room inside. You only got one souvlaki?"

"I'm not pregnant."

"Me either. And a good thing, too. I could not survive another one."

Deny, deny, deny. Maybe Marika wasn't a Makris by blood but she was definitely family by attitude.

I reached out to give back her change, then snapped my hand back without handing it over. I'd spent a lot of time with the counterfeit money the Germans had passed to Kyrios Spiros, the village of Makria's butcher. (Although I'd never use that word in his presence, given that it sounded awfully close to slang for *penis*.) This money had that same slippery, not-quite-legit sheen.

I jumped out of the car, raced back into the souvlaki store. "Where did you get this money?"

The staff looked at each other, shrugged, then laughed.

"You know this is a shop, eh? Where does anybody in a shop get money? Customers."

"Real helpful," I said, although they were right. Anybody could have passed the notes. This wasn't exactly a low traffic area—not even in late summer. The souvlaki shop was popular with locals and tourists who needed to refuel after long stretches of doing nothing at the beach. I skulked back to the Beetle, wondering who the culprit was this time. Probably it was a remnant from the Germans who'd passed the last batch of Monopoly money. They were all dead, but their crime lived on. Whoever paid for their souvlaki with funny money probably didn't know it had been printed in an Italian

basement. Naples, Italy (as opposed to Naples, Florida) was where criminals flocked to learn the art of printing euros.

Marika looked at my empty hands. Her face fell.

I suppressed a sigh. "What's wrong?"

"I thought you were going for dessert."

"No dessert. They sell souvlaki and gyros."

She sniffed. "Maybe we will see something on the way."

Time to hit the road again. I clicked my seatbelt, turned the key in the ignition, then turned it off again. We weren't going anywhere. Only a New Yorker could get out of this parking spot, what with the NIS vans closing in on us.

Holy crap, this was our *Star Wars* moment: one NIS van backing up, the other inching forward. We were Leia, Luke, and Han in the trash compactor. Possibly there was a monster flopping around beneath us, but I didn't like to think about that.

"Uh oh." Marika lowered the gyro to chin level. "What do you think they want?"

"To be as annoying as possible."

"Then it is definitely working. I hate being crushed to death when I am eating."

Probably they didn't care. The vans' side doors slid open and a bunch of men in black jumped out. They had big guns and bulging pockets in their cargo pants. Even Marika's guns weren't that big.

"Their guns are bigger than my guns," Marika said, noticing the same thing.

"Those are some pretty big guns," I admitted.

"I bet if we ran they could hit us."

"You think?"

My sarcasm shot right over her head. "Most likely they have had training."

The men in black surrounded us. Their expressions were as dark as their ninja commando costumes. They looked like they'd been taking fashion tips from Xander; only not all of them had the coloring to pull off a sea of black.

Xander could. Xander could pull off anything, I suspected. He wasn't just silent, he was also drop-dead gorgeous, in a stoic, cut-from-marble way.

Hera slunk out of the van in her banana yellow jumpsuit. What did she want this time? We'd already cleared up the pregnancy rumor. Maybe she wanted to gloat about how she'd slept with Melas and I hadn't.

Ha! The joke was on her: I didn't want to do the horizontal Zorba dance with Melas. Okay, yes, the part of me that had lousy judgment did, but the smart part was in control of my underwear, which meant

my clothes were staying very much on.

I rolled my eyes at her. "What do you want this time?"

She held up a perfectly manicured hand, tipped with blood red talons. "We're asking the questions."

"Was that a question?" I looked down at the ground. A wad of gum was graying on the cracked sidewalk. "Because I think the question mark fell off."

For the record, a Greek question mark looks like a semi-colon. I still haven't figured out what they use for a semi-colon; possibly a question mark.

"This will go more smoothly if you cooperate."

"Legally, do I have to?"

"Why wouldn't you? Have you got something to hide?"

"Not really."

Her mouth formed a disappointed twist. "I will be the judge of that."

"You'd save me a lot of time if you'd just tell me what I'm hiding."

She yanked open my door. "Get out."

"What's the magic word?" Marika said from the passenger seat.

"Now," Hera said.

"Go nowhere until she says please," Marika told me. "I let my boys go hungry for a whole day because they would not say 'please,' and they are children. This one should know better. She is old."

Hera shot her in the face with a handful of eye daggers. "Don't make me hurt you." One of the men in black cleared his throat. She wheeled on him. "What?"

"The boss said no torture."

"You sure he said that?"

"Pretty sure."

Hands on hips. Boobs in the at-attention position. "You think maybe you heard him wrong?"

The man in black's eyes stuck to her jumpsuit, chest high. "Now that I think about it ... anything is possible."

"Get in the van," she told me.

I thought about Xander's text and how I really didn't want to follow his advice. The problem was Hera: the woman was a skanky bitch-face. Man, it was really hard to believe she and her sister Irini ever swam in the same gene pool. Irini Pappas is married to Police Sergeant Pappas, a decent all-the-way-to-the-bone cop who works with Detective Melas. Irini doesn't like her sister much, but she likes me for reasons I don't understand.

"No," I said.

"It's not optional."

"Still not getting in the van. If you've got something to say, say it

here.”

She looked uncomfortable. “It’s classified.”

I said nothing, but I did give her one of my mother’s give-me-a-damn-break looks.

“Okay. We’re trying to catch a fish, and you look like a worm to me. Doesn’t she look like a worm?” She appealed to the ninja yes-men, who nodded dutifully, mostly because ninety-nine percent of their attention was on her boobs. They were impressive, I had to give her that, like a set of man-made Himalayas.

I double-took. “Wait—what?”

“Worm. I said you’re a big, fat worm.

“You mean bait.”

“Worm, bait—same thing.

“Forget it. I’ve done the bait thing before. Ten out of ten, would not recommend. Last time I almost died.”

She shrugged. “Every mission has collateral damage.”

“Still not interested.” I chewed on it a moment. “Who is the fish?”

“I bet it is Baboulas,” Marika said beside me.

“Don’t speak,” Hera told her.

“Definitely not interested if this is about Grandma,” I said.

“Good choice,” Marika said. “Because better people than this garbage have tried to bait Baboulas.”

“Where are they now?” I asked Marika.

“Nobody knows,” she said in a mysterious voice.

“Huh.”

Hera’s face flushed. “The fish is irrelevant.”

“Not to me,” I said. “Tell me about the fish. Is it a goldfish? A clown fish? Are you trying to hook Nemo? Because I have to warn you, his father *will* find him.”

“The worm doesn’t need to know the fish’s name. All you have to do is get on the hook and wiggle.”

“Is this a sex thing?”

“No.”

“Pass,” I said.

Hera said, “Would you do it if it was a sex thing?”

“No.”

She slapped a big grin on her face. “I was hoping you’d turn me down. The thing is, you don’t have a choice.”

It’s Raining Men blasted out of my phone. Aunt Rita had chosen the 1970s hit herself as the tone for her texts and calls. Said she liked the idea of a world where it rained men, but only the sexy ones, because who wanted to be crushed beneath a bald guy with a beer gut?

I adore my aunt. I wished I’d known her my whole life.

Baboulas in the hospital. She is asking for you.

My heart made a squashy sound, then it stopped temporarily. Grandma was in the hospital? She was sick, yeah, but just this morning she'd been in the family compound's lush gardens, hauling out weeds with the energy of a preschooler.

This couldn't be happening. I needed to get Hera out of my hair and get to the Volos Hospital.

"Hera, now is a bad—"

In the seat beside me, Marika squeaked. She slumped over her gyro. To her credit it didn't fall. Even passed out, the woman prioritized food.

"You can't do that! She's ..." My voice trailed off. Telling Hera that Marika was pregnant would be a direct violation of my promise.

"We're the NIS—allegedly." Hera grinned. She was like something out of the Brothers Grimm's original tales—the ones without happy endings. "We can do anything."

There was a tiny buzz. Then my lights went out, too.

Chapter 2

I WOKE up next to a urinating hobo in an old Armani coat and baggy gray pants. The late middle-aged man wiped his nose on his cashmere sleeve, sniffed, and shuffled away, muttering to himself—probably about how there was no privacy in public places these days.

I was in an alleyway, propped up alongside Marika, who had a death-grip on her gyro. There was no sign of the bag with the rest of our food.

I elbowed her. “Wake up.”

“I am awake,” she said out the corner of her mouth. “I was pretending to sleep in case of predators.”

“We’re in an alley and there aren’t any predators.”

“How do you know that?. What if there are rats? Everyone knows rats live in alleys.”

“You know rats are small, right?” I held up my hands to show her exactly how small, but she wasn’t convinced.

“They are like *tsiganes*, they travel in packs.”

Tsiganes is a derogatory word for the Roma people. Amongst their other problems, Greece has a Roma problem. Greece wants the Roma to assimilate, but the Roma aren’t fans of the collective—not when the collective actively despises them.

“There are no rats,” I said, possibly lying.

There might be rats but they weren’t our immediate problem. At least with rats you know a pack of them can strip the meat off your face. Our problem was worse. We weren’t in Kansas anymore. Or Greece. A sign clinging to one of the back doors cut into the alley was most decidedly not Greek, English, or French. And I was pretty sure it wasn’t German.

I peeled my backside off the ground and tried to ignore the stench of fresh and stale urine. “Wait there.”

“As your bodyguard, I should go in your place.”

“Do you want to look?”

“No.”

I raised my eyebrows at her.

“I will be here if you need backup,” Marika said. She was a chicken, which made two of us. But I figured if she was here it was most probably my fault somehow, so I felt responsible.

I trotted out of the alley, took a good look at our surroundings. Spectacular view of the ocean. Lots of colorful buildings, all the way

down the steep hill to the water. A very Catholic-looking dome on the church.

Huh.

Back to the alley I went.

Marika was ripping into her gyro.

“Don’t eat that!”

Reluctantly, she pulled it away from her mouth. “Why not?”

“It might be bad.

She stared at me. “Bad how?”

“Old.”

“How old?”

“At least a couple of hours. Possibly more. Definitely more.”

“Where are we?”

I chewed on my lip. “Somewhere Italian.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Somewhere Italian where?”

“Italy.”

Marika’s frown turned upside down. Her eyes brightened. “I have always wanted to visit Italy.” Hand shielding her eyes, she took a good gander at our surroundings, which were on the filthy and stinky side. “Funny ... Italy is not what I imagined. Where is the pasta and gelato?”

“I’m guessing they keep those in restaurants.”

She rushed over to the nearest dumpster, pitched the gyro inside. “Who needs gyro when you have real Italian food? I am so glad you came to Greece. We go on the best road trips.”

“I don’t think this is a road trip, exactly.”

“What do you mean?”

“Normally on a road trip you remember the road and the trip. How did we get here?”

“I was sleeping. You drove.”

“Guess again.”

“Baboulas’s plane?”

Not even close. “Hera. Hera happened. Hera and her band of stoic ninja dudes.” Given that I wasn’t familiar with the Greek word for ‘dudes’ I just went ahead and said ‘dudes’. “They knocked us out and dumped us in Italy.”

“That *skeela*! I am going to kill her.”

“First we have to get home.”

“Then let us go. Where are my guns?”

That was the moment I realized my bag was gone. I wasn’t the only one. The NIS had dumped us here with nothing except Marika’s gyro, and that was officially garbage.

“No guns. No bags.”

“Okay, we can do this without guns. I can use my hands to squeeze

the stupid out of her. But can we eat first?" Marika asked.

"Do you have money?"

Marika eyed me for a disturbing amount of time. "What?"

"I don't have a purse or money. Do you?"

"One of us will have to sell ourselves. I am a married woman and my husband will not like it, so you will have to do it. It is easy. Stand on a corner and look sexy."

It was scary how quickly she'd leaped from 'we have no money' to 'prostitution'.

"Relax," I said. "We can call Grandma. She'll send a plane or something. We can find a payphone and reverse the charges ... or something."

"Do you know the number?"

She had me there. "No. Do you?"

"I only know my phone number. Everything else is in my phone."

Smartphones were making us stupid. There was a time when I knew all my friends numbers; now I was struggling to remember my own.

"Why Italy?" I said to no one in particular.

We left the alley and burst out onto streets of Italy. Late afternoon. Hot, but not as hot as a Volos scorcher.

"Holy hell," I said suddenly, knowledge from a hundred calendars seeping into my consciousness. "This is Naples."

"Naples!" Marika didn't sound all that sad about our predicament.

Naples. I would bet my life on it. Well, not my life, but definitely Hera's. Now that I knew where we were, I could guess who the NIS was after. My uncle Kostas. It had to be.

I'd never met Dad's other sibling, but I knew he lived in Germany and was in the process of getting his own crime family off the ground. Currently he was working for a boss called Winkler, who—amongst a million other sticky things—had his fingers in the counterfeiting pie. Winkler had sent someone to the Naples area, which produced the best forgeries of the euro. Unfortunately this Winkler was also trying to muscle in on Grandma's territory, not just with fake money but with drugs. Winkler and Grandma had recently struck a deal so that Winkler wouldn't execute Melas for killing one of his adult kids. I'd spent too much time contemplating exactly how many concessions Grandma had had to make to get Winkler to back down.

And I wondered what the fallout was for my uncle ... or whether he was an untouchable dirt bag. No one had a lot to say about the man, although in all fairness I hadn't exactly done much poking around. But now I was in Italy with Marika, with no ears around to pick up any odd questions. Mind you, was it really odd that I wanted to know more about one of my nearest blood relatives? No. No, it

wasn't.

"What's Uncle Kostas like?"

Marika made a face. "He is a piece of shit..."

Well, there you go.

"... A piece of charming shit, but he is family so I would never say that out loud."

Then it came back: Grandma was in the hospital. Fear did a tap dance across my chest, down through my intestines, then it fell headfirst onto my bladder, where it used the organ as a bouncy castle. I gasped.

Marika grabbed my shoulders. "What is it? Are you sick?"

I shook my head. "Not me." I brought her up to speed—which was brief and patchy—about the Grandma situation.

"My Virgin Mary," Marika said, crossing herself like the good Greek Orthodox woman she was. "She will be fine. Baboulas can withstand anything, even death. Probably it is indigestion from eating a man alive."

Marika was wrong. Grandma was the kind of sick that only gets better a lucky percentage of the time, and up until very recently Grandma had shunned treatment for her cancer. It wasn't until I showed up that she decided to take action against the invading force in her body. It wasn't common knowledge throughout the family, and I wasn't sure if Marika was in the know.

"Does she normally eat people alive?"

"There are stories," Marika said darkly.

Yes there were, and I'd heard a lot of those stories before bedtime on the nights Dad tucked me into bed when I was a kid. I wasn't warped because of those tales. Much.

Okay, so what now?

Fact: We were stuck in Italy with no money, no phones, and no handy travel book full of useful Italian phrases, like *Where's the first train out of here?*, and, *How do I stowaway on a train anyway?* Or, *Where's the nearest bathroom with a six-foot wide pipe that leads back to Greece?*

Fact: The NIS had dumped us here for a reason—a reason I didn't give a rat's hairy hiney about because I never agreed to be their bait.

"We should go to the police," I said, wondering if that classified as tattling. The NIS had basically abducted us, which had to be illegal on some level, even if they were supposed to be the good guys. Then again, it was a pretty common belief back home that the CIA was more Sith and less Jedi, so probably we got off lightly. Hera could have had us stuffed into a ditch. First chance I got I was going to snap her bony neck. No doubt there was someone in the Family—several someones—who'd do it for me, but I wanted the pleasure of doing it

myself.

Marika's eyebrows took a quick hike up her forehead. Her mouth did this circle of shock like I'd just announced I was giving up prostitution for a nun's habit.

"The police? We cannot go to the police!"

My forehead bunched up. "Why not?"

"Because of who we are—especially you."

Was that an insult or a fact? I wasn't sure. "So we don't give them our names."

In the middle of that grubby, gummed-up sidewalk in Naples, Italy, as people shoved past us, and more than one pervert pinched my butt, I witnessed Marika experiencing a light bulb moment. It wasn't a simple white globe, and it wasn't alone. Her light bulb moment was a neon sign, worthy of Las Vegas.

Her voice came out breathy and excited. "We could give them fake names!"

"Sure, we could do that," I said slowly, cautiously, aware that there was a potential land mine beneath my feet. "Or we could just not tell them our names."

"Okay, think." She grabbed my arms, started at me hard. "What were the names of your first pet and the first street you lived on?"

"Isn't that how you get your porn star name?"

"Maybe Americans do, but in Greece that is how we get our fake names when the NIS kidnap us and send us to Italy."

"Okay." I crunched names in my head. "My goat doesn't have a name yet."

I had a goat. It was nameless. So sue me, I was waiting on a goat-naming epiphany. Thus far I'd been too busy to spend hours mulling over a name for the adorable lop-eared goat that had helped itself to my room in Grandma's shack and her sheer curtains. We'd faced death together, my goat and me, and still it didn't have a name. A part of me was hoping it would choose its own.

"You never had a beloved pet that someone in the family decided to kill because they believed pets were unhygienic for children?"

I stared at her in horror. "No. Did you?"

"Of course." She said it easy breezy, like it was commonplace.

"I never had a pet."

"Why not?"

"Dad is allergic."

No siblings, no pets; I was starting to get the feeling my childhood hadn't been all it could be.

"Okay. Do you remember your first street?"

"Cedar."

"What kind of name is that?"

“A street name. It’s super common in Oregon.”

“What does it mean?”

“It’s a kind of tree.” I hunted and pecked through my brain, searching for the Greek word. “*Kendros*.”

She shook her head. “Americans are strange.”

“Well what’s your new name then?”

“I never lived on a street with a name before. A lot of small Greek villages have no street names. Everybody knows where everybody else lives—what for do they need street names?”

And she thought Americans were strange.

“So what was your pet’s name?”

“Before my uncle killed my mouse, its name was Zeus.”

“So that makes us Cedar and Zeus?”

“Cher only has one name. Madonna only has one name. God only has one name. It works for them, yes?”

“We can’t walk into a police station with only one name apiece,” I said.

“Why not? This is Italy. They voted for Cicciolina, and she was a porn star. She campaigned topless and nobody cared. They will not care if we have twenty names or one.”

How much worse could this day get?

I tried not to worry about Grandma as we trotted along Naples’ streets, on the hunt for a police station. Marika’s gawking made it easier. My cousin’s cousin’s cousin’s wife was a natural tourist. She was the kind of person who ignored signs prohibiting flash photography.

“What is in Naples that we have to see?” she asked me much too eagerly.

“The exit.”

“Come on, Katerina, we are in Italy. We should not waste the opportunity while we are here. How do we get to Vatican City? We should ask someone. Look.” She pointed a pair of Italian guys loitering on a corner. “They look like they know their way around Italy. You will have to ask them. My English is not so good and my Italian is worse. All I can do is order pasta.”

Marika peered into the alley. It was a different alley to the one where we’d started this adventure. Although, come to think of it, the whizzing hobo did look familiar ...

“I do not think Vatican City is here,” Marika muttered in Greek.

“That’s what I told you,” I hissed.

“You should have said it louder.”

The two men behind us laughed. "Give us your money, phones, and jewelry," the dumpy one said in passable English. He had the physique of a fully loaded baked potato, sprinkled with gold and a double helping of black hair. His poor mother probably got hairballs just kissing his cheek. The second guy was buckteeth in a corn-dog body. I couldn't say what the rest of his face looked like, not with those Chiclets hogging all my attention.

Marika elbowed me. "What did they say?"

Marika's English wasn't that bad. She'd studied the language in school like every other Greek school kid. But she had a way of becoming selectively language-deaf when the mood struck her.

I told her.

She laughed.

In their faces.

"What is she laughing at?" Beaver wanted to know.

"A couple of bozos," I told him. Like most Europeans under a certain age their English was good enough to rob someone at knifepoint but not good enough to understand slang beyond the common pantheon of swear words.

Beaver looked confused. "Bozos?"

"It's American slang for Italian men," I explained.

"Bozos. Heh. I like that. Bozos."

Oh boy. "My friend here has issues." I nodded to Marika.

His forehead scrunched up like a sheet of truck stop toilet paper. "Is she ...?" He drew air circles by his temple.

"You have no idea," I told him.

Baked Potato made a hurry up motion with his knife. The guy was weighed down with enough gold to open his own pawn franchise. "Money. Phones. Jewelry."

"We don't have any," I said. Okay, yes, Marika sported a boulder on her finger big enough to stone a man to death, but I'm usually a jewelry-free zone. Jewelry is something I do when I'm trying to make an effort. Portland tends to be more of a leisure-wear kind of place. If you wear jewelry it's crafted with something weird and cool, like the inner-ear bones of your non-vegan enemies.

"Come on," Beaver said, appealing to his fellow bozo. "What kind of men are we if we steal from the mentally disabled?"

"What are they saying now?" Marika wanted to know.

"I'm getting us out of trouble," I told her in Greek. I skipped the part where I was letting them think she had special needs beyond cake.

"Okay, fine," Baked Potato said in a tone that said he wasn't fine with it at all. "We can still steal from the other one, yes?"

Beaver thought about it a moment. "Sure. Okay. Her we can rob."

Great. This day was getting better with each tick of the clock's little hand. "But I don't have anything!"

Baked Potato wasn't buying it. "No money, no phone, no jewelry? What kind of tourist are you?"

Not a tourist at all. I showed them my empty hands and complete absence of a handbag. "See? Nothing."

"Not even a credit card in your underwear?"

Eww. I've never been the kind to stuff cash or cards in my bra. My mother explained early on that no one wants to touch sweaty boob money. And a good thing, too, because apparently petty criminals knew all about that hiding place.

"Nope, sorry." What the heck was I doing apologizing to someone who was trying to rob me? Clearly Mom had gone overboard with the good manners thing. In a moment I'd be all 'please' and 'thank you,' then 'excuse me' after he got my blood on his knife.

Baked Potato looked at Beaver. "This is a problem. We cannot rob someone and leave with nothing." He turned back to me. "You don't have anything of value?"

"My cute shoes?"

My shoes were cute ... and cheap. Baby Dimitri had given me a good discount on an already inexpensive pair of espadrilles.

"We should teach her a lesson," Baked Potato said.

I raised my hand. "I finished school years ago. No new lessons for this old dog."

They carried on their conversation without me. There was a lot of hand waving involved—even more than Greeks conversing. It made me wonder if the Italian people, rather than birds, were inspiration for Leonardo da Vinci's flying machine.

"I think we should cut her. This knife is—" Baked Potato held up his weapon, a curved blade with ugly teeth. It looked like something you'd use if you were the kind of loser who enjoyed gutting exotic animals. If he knew about my lineage he might consider me exotic, and I really didn't want to wind up on the pointy end of his knife. He switched back to Italian, and the two bozos carried on their conversation.

Meanwhile Marika and I stood there watching them. We had nowhere to go, nowhere to run. Dead-end alley at our backs. A bum behind us doing God knows what. I didn't want to glance back to check out the homeless guy situation; the urine stench was strong with that one.

"We should do something," I said.

Marika stared back at me. Neither of us was experiencing a light bulb moment.

"We could scream," I said. "Are you good at screaming?"

"I have sons."

I took that as a yes.

"But if we scream they might cut us," she continued. "Takis would."

"Takis is a real criminal, not a petty hood."

"This is true," she said proudly.

Beaver snapped his fingers at us. "What are you two talking about? Look at me. We have decided what to do. This time we will let you go, but make sure you tell people we were very scary."

"Very scary," I said, relieved. "Got it."

"He means it," Baked Potato said. He pocketed his knife and got to rearranging the gold around his neck. Then he grinned. "That was a little joke. We decided to kill you, okay?"

Yikes! "No, that's not okay! Not even a little bit okay."

"What is it you say in America?" He tapped his chin thoughtfully. "Too bad, bitch." He whipped out his knife, and things got ugly after that. It all started when I panicked and slapped the knife out of his hand. The blade hit the brick wall and bounced several feet away.

We both stared at it, Baked Potato and I, wide-eyed.

To paraphrase the old quote: see a knife, pick it up, all day long you probably won't wind up stabbed. I also remembered that other warning about how you should never wield a weapon that can be used against you. But animal instincts quickly shot that idea down. I ducked, snatched up Baked Potato's knife. He launched himself at me, so I tossed the knife to Marika, who stood there blinking at it.

"I only know guns," she said. "This is not a gun."

"Stab him," I said through gritted teeth.

"How?"

"Stick the pointy end in him. How hard can it be? He looks like a potato!"

BANG!

Marika and I dropped to the ground in the holy-hell-a-nuclear-bomb-went-off position, arms wrapped protectively around our heads. Footsteps retreated. I peeked out just in time to see the two bozos running for their lives.

My emotions flip flopped. We were alive ... but someone nearby had a gun. But ... the bozos were gone. Meanwhile there was someone nearby with a gun—someone scary enough to shoo away the bozos. Even they knew gun trumped knife.

"What happened?" Marika's shout was muffled by her arms and the concrete. Gunshots in a tight space were hell on the eardrums.

I raised periscope for a moment, took another look. "They left," I shouted back at her.

Then I blinked and saw our savior.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I said.

Chapter 3

“WHAT?” Donk grinned at us. “You don’t sound happy to see the Donk.”

Donk is Baby Dimitri’s teenage nephew. He’s a hundred pounds with his pockets stuffed with electronics, and he dresses like a white reject from a B movie about the ‘hood. Today was more of the same: sagging denim shorts, Calvin Klein boxers gawking over the waistband, tank top that revealed his concave muscles, and a backwards ball cap. He’d been a pain in my butt since his uncle decided I should give him some kind of internship to learn about the ins and outs of organized crime. But I felt sorry for the kid, too. No one in his family seemed to have a lot of time for him.

“What are you doing here?” I yelped. “You’re not supposed to be here. We’re not even supposed to be here.”

Two palms up. “What? I was following you. You are here, so I am here. That’s what following means.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be in school?”

“For what? It looks to me like the real learning is here.” He folded his arms, chuckled his chin at me. “How am I doing? Rate me out of ten.”

I shook away the stupid. “How did you get here?”

“The same plane as you. Did you know that NIS babe had them put you in with the cargo? Right between two dog cages. Do you think she would fuck me?”

Fack is one of those typos spray-painted on walls and underpasses all over Greece. I wasn’t about to correct Donk’s pronunciation or spelling.

“If you mean the dogs, yes. But I’d bring peanut butter if I were you.”

“Jesus,” he said looking horrified. “What is wrong with you? I mean the NIS honey. She looks like she wants to be spanked by the Donk.” He made an overly enthusiastic butt-slapping hand gesture that made me wonder if that was something he’d picked up on one of his mother’s movie sets, aka: his living room. Donk’s mother was in the porn business. Or rather, the porn business was something that happened in her. She’d offered me a job. I declined. No one in Greece wanted to hire me to do anything decent. It was all death, drugs, or sex.

“Trust me,” I said, “Hera doesn’t want you to spank her. She’s

Detective Melas' ex-girlfriend."

"So? I am a major criminal's nephew."

"Think about that for a moment. Imagine all the ways it wouldn't be possible."

Was I talking about him and Hera or me and Melas?

He squinted at me. "Are you saying she is old?"

"No!"

"Because I would fuck you and you are older than her."

Marika's hand snapped out and clipped his ear. "Have some respect for your elders."

He yelped, clutching the side of his head. "I respect her. I respect. R-E-S-P-E-C-K." He chased his atrocious spelling with a verse of Aretha Franklin's hit.

"Keep it up and you will call every cat in Naples to you."

Donk's eyes lit up. "We're in Italy?"

As Scooby Doo said: Ruh roh.

"I hear the women here are the best. Italian. Veeery sexy." Using his hands he drew curves in the air, too busty to be real.

I rolled my eyes. "Where did you get the gun?"

He looked confused. "What gun?"

I glanced around. Homeless Guy had vanished.

We abandoned the idea of Vatican City in favor of going to the police. Or rather I did. Marika and Donk were still down for a trip to see il Papa. I gave them two choices: come with me or go their own way. I was relieved when they glumly decided I was the less fun, but more sensible, option. Traversing Italy alone, penniless and without clean underwear, wasn't on my bucket list.

I stopped someone who looked respectable this time, a young professional woman who spoke an abundant amount of English and was happy to test it all on me. She quickly sketched directions on the back of my hand, and we were off.

Italy, the woman had told me, had what sounded like a dozen or so kinds of police. What I wanted was a regular ol' policeman with the Great and Terrible Oz's powers, real or fake. A hot air balloon was fine if it could get us back to Greece.

We trotted up the street. The police building was right where the woman said it would be, in flowery, hesitant English, delivered with a side of descriptive hand waving. Up some steps, down some steps, past crumbling arches painted with exhaust grime, under sagging strings of laundry. Along the way we were almost struck by three cars and seven mopeds. In Italy motor vehicles were people, too. At least at home we

only had to contend with corporations looking in the mirror, pretending to be We the People.

Naples' government had wedged the police building between a cafe and a record store. Graffiti artists had gone wild everywhere except the police building's smooth face. The entire block was four stories high, with shallow balconies jutting their ornate steel lips at the view.

"I will stay out here," Donk said. Easy to see where his priorities lay. Across the street a group of scantily clad women were plying their wares to potential customers.

Snorting, I pushed my way through the door, followed by Marika. A weather system of cigarette smoke descended upon us. I raised my eyebrows at Marika.

"What?" she asked.

"I don't think it's safe for you to be in here."

"Why not?"

"Because of the baby."

"What baby?"

I shook my head and fought my way through the smog to the front desk. Within seconds I'd ascertained that the policeman spoke English and that Italy had strict antismoking laws, but they were the police so who was going to spank them? Nobody, that was who.

"Do you know there are prostitutes across the street?"

He leaned sideways, looked at the working girls, leaned back. "Where else would they go? That is where they work."

"Isn't that illegal?" I didn't care if women wanted to sell sex, as long as it was their choice. Grandma refused to deal in prostitution. She believed women were capable of more—just look at her. I was just surprised to see sex for sale in the streets during daylight hours, openly and nearly nakedly.

"No. Only pimps and brothels are illegal. If the women work for themselves ..." He shrugged. "No problem."

Europe: it was the old world, and boy could it be different.

When I made the same comment to Marika in Greek she said, "It is not illegal in Greece either if you are registered and have a medical card that must be updated every two weeks. But most prostitutes there are Albanian and illegal. The Albanians take all our jobs."

The cop glanced from Marika to me, and back again. "How can I help you today, eh? Are you in trouble?"

I gave him the facts, stripped down to bare bones with basically no information on them. A dastardly organization had kidnapped us and dumped us in Greece with no identification, no money, no phones.

"We did have that gyro," Marika said in Greek. "Too bad I had to throw it away. It was a good gyro."

The cop shook his head. "That is Greeks for you. They think they invented pizza."

Ol' eagle ears Marika was all over that. "What did he say about pizza?" I told her and she puffed up like a thick, deep-dish crust. "Greeks invented pizza. Italians invented bad pizza."

"Italian pizza is pretty good," I said in Italy's defense, not mentioning I'd only ever consumed its American incarnation.

Marika leaned on the counter—hard. "You tell him this: Who was Hitler's friend during World War II, eh? Italy, that is who. Not Greece—Italy. They sneaked, sneaked, sneaked through Albania and came into Greece." Her fingers tippy-toed across the hard surface.

Thanks to the miracle of Marika's intermittent English skills, she spat the words out in a language we could all understand. Fabulous. Marika had just Godwin's Law-ed our best shot at getting out of Italy.

The cop kept his eyes on her and slowly reached for his pen and paper. "What did you say your names were?"

My brain froze. My real name wanted to come out. This is why my parents had drilled my name and address into me when I was little—so that if I was lost I'd be able to tell a policeman who I was and where I lived.

"This is Zeus, and I'm Cedar."

Sweet relief. I didn't screw up the lie.

He put down the pen. "Cedar and Zeus?"

"Like Cher and Madonna," I told him.

"And you say some organization abducted you and left you in Greece with no documentation? In effect, you entered Italy illegally?"

It sounded bad when he put it like that. "Yes, but it wasn't our fault."

"Just one moment, please." He vacated his chair, scurried toward the end cubicle, where a plainclothesman sat hunched over his desk, coffee in one hand, cigarette balanced on his lip. The uniform's mouth shot out a streamer of words, then both men looked up at us.

I grabbed Marika by the elbow. "Let's get out of here."

"Funny, I was thinking the same thing. You cannot trust Italians. Look at Mussolini, Berlusconi, and that Chef Boyardee."

"Chef Boyardee?"

"When we went to America Takis said he wanted to try the famous Chef Boyardee. Turns out Chef Boyardee is a lie."

We hurried out, causing only a minor traffic jam at the door. I shoved Marika through and whistled for Donk. "We've got to run."

"You go," he said. "Big Donk wants to play." He stepped off the curb. My hand shot out, yanked him back.

"Those are prostitutes."

"So?"

“How are you planning to pay them?”

“The Donk doesn’t pay for sex. If he tries, the girls refuse to take his money.”

“Trust me, these ones want money. How are you planning to *pay* them?”

He whipped out his wallet, shoved a platinum credit card in my face. “The Donk has Ben-ja-mins, yo.”

Mood soaring, I snatched it out of his hand. If he had money we could get home ... or call for help. “A Benjamin is a hundred dollar bill. This is a credit card. Is it good?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I bought it from a guy I know.”

My eyebrows took a hike. “A stolen credit card?”

“Hey, it’s not like I’ve ever used it. I just carry it around so women think I’ve got money, yo.”

Hopes dashed, I thumped him on the forehead with the plastic. “An Italian prostitute doesn’t want your fake plastic. She wants cash—euros—just like the working girls in Greece. What else is in your pocket? Phone?” I glanced back through the door of the police building. Uniform and Plainclothes were headed our way. “Yikes. Let’s go.”

We bolted down the street, Marika clutching her bountiful chest with one arm, keeping her dress from flying up with the other. Donk loped ahead of us. We followed. I figured he was only a few years past his peak Hide and Seek years, so he probably knew what he was doing.

The nice thing about Naples was that it was twisty and turny, making it easy to get lost—or lose someone. At a fast walk, we rounded a corner, took some more stairs, and found ourselves near the water. Like the buildings with their clashing paint colors, the boats were attention seekers, too. Italy looked a lot like Greece, really. Lots of reds, yellows, and blues. I glanced back.

We’d lost the police escort.

“My Virgin Mary,” Marika muttered, hand shielding her eyes from a slowly retreating sun. Naples had a more familiar view of the sun’s path; Portland was also on the west coast. Volos and the village of Makria faced east.

“What is it?” I asked her.

Stupid question. This was Marika. What she saw was food. Restaurants, cafes, and street vendors sizzling meats on the waterfront. A baker was hawking loaves piled high on a table. Italian bread, warm, fresh, crusty.

My mouth watered. My stomach made growly noises.

Donk followed my gaze all the way to the table. “You hungry?”

“If I do not eat I will die,” Marika said.

“If you do not eat you will lose weight,” Donk told her.

Marika gasped. It was a sharp, dangerous sound, like the sound of knives flying towards your face. I jumped in between them, arms outstretched.

“Back to your corners.”

“The child called me fat.”

“The fatty called me a child. I’m the Donk.”

For the record, Donk’s real name was Yiorgos—George—a name he shunned like it was well-fitting jeans.

“Enough. Jeez. Donk.” I held out my hand. “Phone, please.”

He pulled it out of his pocket, slapped in on my palm, glaring at Marika. She was giving him the killer stink-eye.

Blissfully, Donk’s phone had a signal. I’d worry about roaming charges later. No question that I’d reimburse the kid—he was caught up in this just as much as we were. I scrolled through his Contacts list. One, and only one, name jumped out at me.

Desperate times called for desperate measures, and this was as desperate as it got. I did it: I called Baby Dimitri.

“What do you want, eh?” he said, picking up on the third ring.

“Is that any way to talk to your customers?”

He chuckled. “Katerina Makris-with-an-S. Why are you calling me on my worthless nephew’s phone?”

I took a deep breath and laid it out for him.

“*Theos* and *Christos*,” he said when I was done, invoking God and Christ. “Are you fucking crazy calling me? You know the NIS have got their heads right up my *kolos*. Probably they are listening to this right now. They will kill me. I have to go.”

“Wait!”

Too late. He’d already ended the call.

We’d see about that. I hit redial.

The Godfather of Espadrilles and High Heels answered immediately. “I’m not here.”

“Wow, the NIS works fast, because your ghost is answering your phone. Where should I send flowers?”

“Tell me again how you are not your grandmother, eh? Because to me you sound just like the woman.” He let out a sigh like there was a giant pain in his ass, which there kind of was—me. “I cannot help you, okay? You know what your biggest problem is?”

“I’ve got a pretty good idea.” It began with F and ended with Y ... with AMIL wedged between the two letters.

“You do not think like a criminal. Wake up, Katerina Makris with an S. You are living in a criminal world now, with people chasing you who believe you are a criminal, too. And there you are, *la-la-la* like a little girl with a basket of sweets, skipping to her grandmother’s

house.”

“La-la-la,” Laki said in the background. Then Baby Dimitri’s sidekick cackled. Where was he with one of his little firebombs when the NIS had loaded us into their vans? I could have used him then.

“*Skasmos*,” Baby Dimitri hissed at him. “Can’t you see I am trying to have a conversation here?” Then he was back. “You do not think like a criminal, and that is your biggest problem. You understand?”

I thought about it. “Not really. Can you tell Aunt—”

The line went dead. Baby Dimitri had ended the call—again. I wandered back to where Marika and Donk were busy contemplating the baker with his breads in display. They were some mighty fine-looking loaves, stacked in their uneven pyramids. Very Italian, the way they didn’t give too much of a damn how they were arranged.

Marika wiped the back of her hand across her lips. “What did he say?”

“Can’t help us. We’re on our own. He won’t even call the Family.”

“They will be looking for us,” she said. “I know it.”

I was sure she was right, but the NIS had dumped us so far away I wasn’t sure the Family would even know where to start. Not unless Hera and her rotten band of assholes had left a trail of breadcrumbs. Which she wouldn’t. She struck me as the neat type; anal-retentive, Freud would call her. Nobody dressed that well unless they also had issues with everything being perfect, sterile, and breadcrumb-free.

“I don’t think they even know where to start,” I said, thinking about Elias. Where was my bodyguard? Was he crying in a cell somewhere, wishing he had some of Stavros’s fondant *patates* instead of bread and water?

Bread and water ...

My stomach growled.

Marika plopped down on the ground. Fat tears began to roll down her cheeks. Her lower lip wobbled. “I am so hungry I could eat the child, even though he is all bones.”

“We do have find food,” I agreed.

“What’s aaaaaap?” Donk shot a worried look at Marika. “What is she crying about? Did she lose a kilo? Don’t worry, you’ll find it again—and its friends.”

Marika wiped the tears away with the back of her hand. “When I eat and get my energy back I am going to slap you.”

I raised my pointy finger at Donk. “You. Enough with the weight comments.” I swung the finger around. “And you—enough with the hitting. Do you both want to go into timeout?”

“Timeout does not work.” Marika sniffed. “Not with my boys.”

I believed her. To kids like hers, timeout was an opportunity to plot the next major disaster. An idea flashed into my head. Simple—a

broadest of broad strokes of an idea. But it just might work.

I clicked my fingers. "Donk, phone."

"What is the magic word?"

I gritted my teeth. "Please."

"That's not the magic word."

"Just pretend I said it."

"That's not how it works."

"Phone now or I'll strangle you." I rolled my eyes. "Please."

"Even if I wanted to I couldn't."

"Did you get robbed? Please tell me you didn't get robbed?"

He stared at me. Realization dawned. I hadn't given his phone back. Duh.

I reached into my pocket but my hand came out empty. I looked around. No phone. "God on a gondola," I said. "Stupid Italian pickpockets."

Donk didn't look unhappy. He rubbed his hands together, grinning. "The bad news is that my phone got stolen. The good news is that now my mother will buy me a better one."

Marika and I gawked at him. "That's the good news?" I said.

"It's great news! I've been asking for a new one for months now. How am I supposed to do business with an old phone?"

"You're a school kid," I said. "You're not supposed to do business at all."

"I have ambition," he said. "I'm going places."

"You sure are." And what a place it was. Aside from the overflowing trash and the general filth, Naples was paradise. "But I bet you imagined going there with money."

"Money was part of the plan." He glanced around. "Being poor sucks."

"You've only been poor this afternoon."

"Yes, and it's the worst afternoon of my life. Beautiful women everywhere and I don't have any way to get them to like me."

"Buck up, little camper," I said. "You're the Donk."

He raised his head. "You are right. Wait here, unless you see me running. If I am running, you should run, too."

We found a bridge big enough to fit all three of us underneath. This is what my life had come to, eating stolen bread under a bridge that smelled like pee—stale and fresh. Something about this moment struck me as familiar. As I chewed I thought it over.

Man, the Italian bread was good ... and also just like Greek bread.

Then it came to me. "Holy cows on a conch shell, I remember this

from a movie.”

Marika nodded like she knew. “*Aladdin*.”

“*Aladdin*,” Donk agreed. “When he breaks the bread and gives it to the children.”

“You are the monkey,” Marika said to him.

“Fack you. You are the monkey.”

“You are all skinny and ooh-ooh-ooh!” Marika made monkey noises that struck me as scarily accurate.

“I can’t believe we’re stealing to eat,” I said.

“Technically this one did the stealing.” She hooked her thumb at Donk.

“If bakers did not want people to steal then they should make it more difficult,” the thief in question said.

His logic had a small amount of logic in it, which bothered me. Normally I didn’t condone theft, but I’d been afraid Marika would go Godzilla and storm Naples. This place seemed pretty laid-back and ill equipped for a Godzilla attack.

Now that I had food in my stomach I could think.

Hera’s actions weren’t about petty revenge, although there was certainly an element of that present. The woman was a bitch, after all. But she couldn’t have used NIS resources without a valid reason and authorization. And there was only one reason I knew of to airlift us to the Naples area.

Uncle Kostas.

Counterfeiting.

Two things that, smushed together, made one.

To get home with the NIS’s help, possibly we’d have to make contact with the counterfeiters, maybe learn some new skills. Which was a bit of a problem. Art isn’t my thing. Stick figures? Even those are shaky when mine is the hand steering the pen.

Satisfaction was something I didn’t want to give Hera. This was war. Right now, all I wanted was to shove her perfectly coiffed head down a Greek toilet. The pipes are narrow. There’s no seat. Standing room only. Shoving her head down a Greek toilet would be perfect.

Normally I’d jump to do what law enforcement wanted me to do. On TV the good guys give people choices: do this or go to prison. Old me would jump to it to avoid prison. New, post-Greece me felt yucky about doing the NIS’s bidding. My DNA was suddenly all chatty, pointing out how cooperating with law enforcement wasn’t what my people were known for.

But my ancestors and still-living relatives weren’t stuck in Naples with a pair of dependents. I couldn’t say “Screw it” and hitch a ride with a potential serial killer back to Greece. Carjacking or straight-up car theft went against everything I believed in, no matter how much

my genes were rubbing their collective chins, going, *Hmm, now there is an idea we like*. Stowing away on a train? Knowing my recent luck we'd wind up in Russia, shot to death for not having papers. Going to the American Consulate was out of the question. Sure, they'd help me, but what about Marika and Donk? The Greek Consulate was out, too. They were bound to be in the NIS's pocket. Government departments were, as Dad always said, the same shit.

Which left me with what?

Nothing.

Even my one phone call hadn't worked out how I'd hoped.

I peered out at the street. Naples was a busy, bustling city, in a relaxed way. Nobody seemed too worried about much of anything, least of the garbage piled on the streets. If I closed one eye the overflowing trash blurred, while the view sharpened into brighter, better focus.

How had Dad seen Italy?

A light bulb came on in my head. One of those searing, industrial lights used in stadiums. Dad had been here in Italy. Not traveling as Michail Makris, but as one of his foreign alter egos. The man had a safe full of false identities, and that safe was in the master bathroom at home. I really didn't want to picture him perched on the toilet, trying to decide who he was going to be on any given day. Anyway. Dad had been in Naples—and recently. And given recent events, it hadn't been a leap to consider that he might be mixed up in this counterfeiting thing.

I was in Naples. Dad had potentially been in Naples. This was, maybe, possibly, a loose thread I could pull.

Suddenly Baby Dimitri's total lack of assistance didn't seem so lacking after all. He'd basically tipped me off. I wasn't thinking like a criminal, he had said. What would a criminal do if they wanted to infiltrate a counterfeiting ring?

Find another criminal.

"Crap on a cracker," I said aloud.

Chapter 4

THE ITALIAN WORKING girl backhanded Donk.

He limped back to us with a big grin on her face. "I touched her breast. Nice."

"Jiminy freakin' Cricket." I grabbed my head with both hands, because this—*this*—was what I was working with. "Never mind. I'll do it myself."

I trotted across the street to where two prostitutes in thongs (one pink, one red) and net tank tops were lounging against a wall, looking pissed off at the world. *I get it*, I wanted to say.

"Hi," I said in effervescent English. "How are you this evening?"

Their gazes scraped me from top to bottom, then they went back to looking deathly bored. "What do you want?" Pink Thong wanted to know.

"I don't suppose you know someone who could teach me to make money?"

She looked me over again. "How much money?"

"As much as I can make."

"In those clothes?" She said something to her gal pal in the red thong. They both laughed, and not in a 'with me' kind of way.

Wait a minute ... "I didn't mean I want to be a prostitute!"

Their laughter stopped dead in its tracks. "We are not prostitutes," Pink Thong said. "We are business women."

"Entrepreneurs," Red Thong added.

Clearly it was Casual Friday.

"Entrepreneurs. Obviously." I slapped my forehead theatrically. "Silly me. Let's rewind, okay? Making money. Euros. Printing." My printer noises weren't great but impersonations aren't exactly my forte. Unless I've been drinking—then they're Oscar-worthy.

Both women instantly rolled their eyes. "She thinks we are criminals," Red said to Pink. "We are businesswomen—understand? Maybe in America this is the work of a criminal, but in Italy what we do is good, honest work."

"I know that," I said, trying to dig myself out of the hole I was apparently up to my neck in. "But I thought maybe some of your, uh, coworkers or clients might be, uh, connected?" If this were the Summer Olympics and I were a gymnast, I'd be looking at straight zeroes.

"There is only one way to make money," Pink Thong says. "Get a

job. An honest job, like us. Now get off our corner, eh? You are scaring our customers away.”

From beyond the grave my mom muttered, *Stand up straight* as I hoofed it back to Marika and a drooling Donk. I yanked back my shoulders and made believe I didn’t suck at life.

Marika eyed me. “How did it go?”

“Great ...”

“Really?” She looked doubtful.

“... if great means I totally struck out.”

“*Putanas* turned you down?”

Donk snorted. “Congratulations, you are the first person in history to strike out with a prostitute.”

“At least they didn’t slap me!”

His face pinkened. “Only because I didn’t have money, otherwise they would have been all over me.”

“I bet you think strippers really like you, too. You’re not like the other customers, right?”

“I’m not. They said so.”

I patted him on the back. “You keep telling yourself that.”

His face fell. “Are you saying they don’t like me?”

“I’m saying stay away from people who are only your friends when you have money.”

“It is good advice,” Marika said. “You are definitely going to be a good Baboulas after the current Baboulas passes.” She crossed herself.

“Never.”

“Heh.” She hooked her thumb at me. “This one still thinks she can escape her destiny and Baboulas’s wishes.”

Donk bobbed his head like a stupid chicken. “Nobody escapes Baboulas’s wishes.”

Great. Now they were bonding over my fate. Remind me again why I didn’t just bail on both and head to the nearest American Consulate?

Because I’m not a jerk, that’s why. For better or worse these were my monkeys and this was my circus. Generally I’m not a fan of the circus; too many clowns.

“Let’s go find a criminal,” I said, breaking up their party.

We were standing on the sidewalk not too far from where this misadventure had started. So far we’d cozied up to precisely zero criminals. Like everything in life, when you need a decent criminal you can’t find one.

It wasn’t night yet, but it would be happening soon. We’d have to

find shelter before we tripped on garbage and broke vital parts of ourselves.

Marika huffed and puffed. "How can we tell regular Italians from criminal Italians? Everybody is too well dressed. Even that hobo I keep seeing is wearing Armani."

I shot Marika a look. "You've seen him more than once?"

So far I'd seen the guy in the ancient Armani coat, or someone just like him, a half dozen times. We must have been traveling in the same social circles.

"What am I—blind? I have excellent eyesight. The only thing I do not see is something that is not there."

"We need drug dealers." Hands on hips, I took stock of the street. Businessmen, businesswomen, trendy professionals. Marika was right—everyone was too well dressed.

"We should go back to the police station and ask what places we should avoid," she went on, "then we will know exactly where to go."

I was this close to unleashing a dose of sarcasm, when I spotted salvation.

Or doom.

Probably doom.

But also possibly salvation.

Okay, it was fifty-fifty.

"Do you see what I see?" I said to her.

"That depends—what do you see?"

Baked Potato and Beaver, that's what. Down the street both bozos were leaning against a wall, keeping a casual eye out for trouble. They looked like men good at finding it, which was exactly what I needed right now.

"Come on." I set off down the street.

Beaver spotted us first. He slapped Baked Potato on the chest and nodded in our direction. "Hey! Remember us? It's the bozos!"

Baked Potato didn't look happy. He muttered something in Italian—probably, "Here come the losers who had nothing to steal."

He pointed a finger gun at me. "Don't come any closer. You went bang-bang at us."

"I didn't go bang-bang at you. If I'd had a gun I would have shot at you sooner. Anyway, that was then, this is now. Friends?"

He eyed my outstretched hand. "What do you want?"

"You look like a guy who knows people."

"What kind of people?"

"I'm looking for someone who knows something about counterfeiting."

They exchanged glances. Baked Potato chuckled his chin at me. "What kind of counterfeiting? Money? Designer bags? Clothing?"

“Money.”

“We don’t know anything about that,” Beaver said.

“We don’t know anything about anything,” Baked Potato added.

To my horror, Donk stepped forward and planted himself beside me. He had on his teen thug face. Uh oh.

“Donk,” I said in my best don’t-mess-with-me voice. Which, to be honest, wasn’t that great. Even as a bill collector I’d lacked bite. Mostly I shamed debtors into paying up with my good manners.

“You need a man to handle this,” he said in Greek, shushing me.

Marika snorted. “She is more of a man than you are.”

Was that a compliment? I rubbed my cupid’s bow, trying to decide if I needed to start waxing. Last time I checked there was no dark hair sprouting there, but half my DNA was Greek. Excess hair could strike at any time.

Donk took the high road by ignoring her. He addressed the Italian bozos in the kind of English no one should use. “Women, eh? They talk, talk, talk. What they say? Nothing.” I tried crushing him with a look but his mouth kept moving. “We look for someone who make the Ben-ja-mins. You two ... you looks like smart mens who knows Ben-ja-mins.”

“Donk,” I said.

He laughed, bro-style. “See? Talk, talk, talk.” He did the little yapping hand gesture that has put many a husband in an early grave, then winked at me, the scrawny little jerk. “Say my name, bay-bee.”

If that’s how he wanted to play it, it would be my pleasure. “Sure thing, little Yiorgos.”

His mouth fell open stupidly. His eyebrows shot up. Red stained his cheeks. He shuffled backwards to let the adults do the talking.

Meanwhile, Baked Potato and Beaver were busy laughing at Donk’s predicament.

“Goodbye, little boy,” Beaver said between snorts of derision. Then he yelped as my shoe scraped down his shin. He chased it with a jagged stream of Italian curse words.

I did a one-shouldered shrug. “My foot slipped.”

Baked Potato watched his buddy hop around for a moment, then he nodded at me. “We told you we don’t know anything about anything.”

“Come on. Donk was right—you two do look like you know a thing or two.”

“Nothing. That is what we know—*capishe*?”

“Nothing,” Beaver wailed. He was having pain management issues.

Please, how stupid did they think I was? Maybe they didn’t know anything personally, but I was certain they knew a guy who knew another guy. Like law enforcement, crime is a whole sticky network.

“Either of you bozos ever hear of a Greek mob boss named Katerina Makri?”

“Who?”

My forehead scrunched up. “How about ‘Baboulas’? Does that mean anything to you?”

“Ba-who-ass?”

Either they were liars or Grandma’s wooden spoon didn’t reach as far as Naples, Italy.

“Okay ...” My gaze cut to the phone on his hip. That one tiny plan was still rattling around inside my head. “I don’t suppose I can borrow your phone?”

Baked Potato tipped back his head and laughed. “Do I look stupid?”

“Is that a trick question?”

It was wasted on him. “If I give you my phone you will steal it. I know this because that is what we do.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

His face said he no understandee my English. He stole phones therefore everyone stole phones. Criminal logic.

“Just one teensy phone call. Please.”

His face said my words didn’t compute. “Teensy?”

“Small.” With two fingers I showed him just how small. What I left out was the part where that call would be to Greece, and, depending on his plan, expensive. He might have to sell a kidney.

“Okay, okay.” He tugged the phone off his belt. “One call, okay? If you steal it I will cut one of these two. The fat one, I think, because she will run slower than the *bambino*.”

Marika eyed him dangerously. “Did he just call me fat? I heard him say fat.”

“Not right now, Marika.”

Baked Potato slapped the phone into my hand. The cover was pink and dotted with tiny hearts. I looked at him and he shrugged. “I stole the phone, okay?”

“From who, a fifteen-year-old?”

“She was maybe ten.”

Ugh.

People do weird stuff. Me, I stepped sideways to make the call, even though it gave me precisely zero more privacy.

“What’s the number for Greece?” I asked Marika.

She made a face like I was speaking Bulgarian.

“Three zero,” said Donk. “I give my number to a lot of girls on the internet. They all want to talk to the Donk.”

“How many actually call?”

“None yet, but they will. Probably they are intimidated by me.”

I shook my head and made the call. The internet is king of the world, but there are still ways of getting numbers you don't know without resorting to your search engine of choice. The call I made was to the operator, and, after a long stretch of silence, where I was sure she'd hung up on me, the phone began to ring.

Police Constable Pappas picked up on the third ring.

"Pappas? Oh my God, it's Katerina Makris. Don't hang up ..."

"I ... wasn't going to." He sounded bewildered. "Is there a problem?"

The story tumbled out of my mouth, followed by, "Is Melas around?"

"Naples?" Across the miles, I heard him shaking his head. "Melas is at the hospital."

An alarm went off in my head. "Hospital?"

"You don't know." Flat. Not a question.

Panic saddled up its man-trampling horse. "Is he with my grandmother?"

"Yes ..."

"What—"

A hairy hand flashed before my eyes. Baked Potato snatched the phone away.

"Are you calling Greece on my phone? You can't call Greece on my phone! The charges will eat me alive."

"I thought it wasn't your phone."

"It wasn't at first, but now I'm paying for the plan, and my plan, it does not include international calls. You owe me big money now!"

"I don't owe you anything. You tried to rob us. Or did you forget that part?"

He whipped out his knife, danced it through the air like a drunken ballerina.

"Say 'bye-bye.' "

I stumbled backwards, narrowly avoiding the blade. "Time to go," I yelped, grabbing Marika and Donk.

"I can take him," Donk said. Chest puffed up, he danced from foot to foot. Someone had been watching too much pay-per-view boxing.

Damn it. Last thing we needed was Donk going chest-to-blade with Baked Potato. I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and shoved him along the sidewalk, away from danger.

"Why did you do that?" he whined.

"I'm saving your life, dumb-ass."

"Nice," he said.

The evening was one dead end after another. Working girls, boys, and girl-boys were less than helpful. Mostly they wanted to give me fashion and makeup tips. Two out of ten drug dealers pulled knives on me. One offered me “anything I wanted” for an hour with Marika. Another dealer offered me the same amount of anything for ten minutes with Donk.

Every so often I caught a glimpse of the homeless guy I was starting to think of as the Armani Hobo. He was lurking around the edges of this whole shitty trip, marking his territory. For a guy who never had a drink in his hand, he sure peed a lot. He really needed to see a doctor about that. Our luck scraping Naples’ seedy underbelly had improved whenever he was in sight. It wasn’t long before I was actively trying to stay in his shadow.

“No more,” Marika said. “My feet ...”

She eyed Donk, but the teenager didn’t bite. A clear sign that Marika wasn’t the only sleepyhead. I yawned in solidarity.

Grandma was in the hospital, and things were bad enough that Melas had to be there as extra security. So far I’d failed to infiltrate the counterfeiting business in the Naples area, and I still had two dependents—maybe three—to take care of. Things looked dark—partly because it was dark. All the pretty lights in Naples didn’t obscure the fact that night was here and we had nowhere to sleep, eat, or pee.

“Things will look better in the morning,” I told my two compadres. “In the meantime, we need a roof over our heads. We should look for a homeless shelter.”

“Bridge,” Marika said. “I have always wanted to sleep under a bridge.”

Marika was living the life of a cloistered mob wife until I stumbled into Greece. Now she was living dangerously in Naples, minutes away from sleeping under her first bridge.

“I’ve never slept under a bridge either,” I admitted.

We looked at Donk.

“I got a handjob under a bridge once,” he bragged.

“It does not count if you do it yourself,” Marika said.

Donk opened his mouth to deliver a cutting remark, but I cut him off by clapping my hand over his piehole.

“Okay,” I said, attention sliding to the Armani Hobo, who was skulking nearby. “Let’s find ourselves a hospitable bridge.”

As far as bridges went it was definitely not a bridge. It was more like the stoop of some kind of shop. A bookstore, I thought, squinting

through the glass. Over the door, a decent awning shaded us from the moon. We'd agreed on a bridge, but there's a limit to how far you can walk on a handful of bread.

"What makes this better than an alley?" I asked Marika.

"This does not smell like urine."

"Yet," Donk said.

We looked at him. Hard. "If you need to go, pick another stoop," I said.

We settled on the stoop side by side, three pathetic little birds. I half hoped Marika and Donk would start bickering. I wanted the distraction after Baked Potato whacked our shot at a police rescue and cut Pappas off before I could find out about Grandma.

A figure moved in the thin darkness. Our Armani Hobo again.

Beside me, Marika and Donk were out cold. I wiggled my arm and realized it was damp with drool. *Eww*.

"Hey!" I called out to the man in the once-luxurious coat. My voice came out more like a hiss because I was trying to be considerate of my sleeping companions.

He glanced over at me, then shuffled away to a garbage can further down the street. After poking through it for a moment, he shot me another furtive glance before ducking around a corner.

What was he up to?

Sighing, I gently propped Marika up against Donk and eased my butt off the stoop. I hoofed it to the garbage can, glancing around to see if anyone was witnessing the stony rock bottom of my adult life, to date.

That was really saying something the way my life had been going lately.

I peered into the garbage can. Shockingly, it was overflowing with garbage. Had Armani Hobo been foraging for food? Down here on my life's rock bottom it didn't seem like such a bad idea. How old could the garbage be? Not to mention we were talking Italian garbage here, not crappy chicken nuggets and Big Mac wrappers. This was high quality, foreign garbage, which instantly meant it was a better class of garbage.

Funny—it reeked like American garbage.

Oh well, beggars couldn't be choosers. And with that cheery thought in mind, I went picking through the wrappers and containers, searching for something that would turn my joyless little trio's frowns upside down.

Then my hand hit something hard, cold, and potentially deadly. Unease crept up my arm.

The Armani Hobo had dumped his gun.

Back home, once you toss something in the garbage it's considered there for the taking, the Supreme Court declared back in 1988. Yeah, there are local laws that override the California vs. Greenwood ruling, but for the most part garbage is public domain. Dumpster diving is a growing thing back home. There are even some loons out there who do all their fine dining at dumpsters. Unsurprisingly, they call themselves 'freegans'. The difference between freegans and the homeless is that freegans collect paychecks, own homes, and happily drop five bucks per cup at the local coffee shop for coffee ground between the butt cheeks of a free-range exotic animal.

But Naples wasn't home. For all I knew they'd whip me with a Prada belt and toss me into an Italian prison, where I'd be forced to live out my days subsisting on grappa and Italian bread.

As far as ideas went, this was probably one of the bad ones. But on the other hand, what if a child found it? Better for me to take it. Besides, I couldn't shake the feeling that Armani Hobo had left the gun for me. Which was a first; even my own grandmother wouldn't give me a gun. Instead, she'd found it funny to give me Dad's old piece—his childhood slingshot. But, I can hear you saying, David slew Goliath with a slingshot, so that sounds like a pretty great weapon.

No. David brained Goliath with a sling. Totally different weapon.

But Dad's slingshot wasn't so bad. I'd used stones as ammo before, and Baby Dimitri gave me a bag of marbles for when I wanted to shoot people in style. Baby Dimitri also gave me a statue with an aggressively huge wiener, but that was less of a weapon and more of a talking piece. The sucky thing about a slingshot was that at my skill level—novice—it took a few seconds to load up the cradle and aim. Mostly it was useful for hiding in the bushes and freaking out the bad guys. Greeks are more superstitious than most.

Unfortunately, like my phone, money, family, and sunglasses, Dad's old slingshot was in Greece.

I stuffed the gun in my dress pocket. Too bulky. Too much sag, even though the gun was smallish and as ladylike as a death contraption could be.

"Would it have hurt you to have left a holster?" I called out, aware that I was looking a gift gun down the barrel.

Something flew toward me, out of the darkness. I picked it up.

Huh. An inner thigh holster.

"Thanks," I said.

A gun made me feel like I'd leveled up. I could shoot a rat if I had to, or wave it threateningly at a bad guy. One way or another I had to find the bad guys in order to get home. I just didn't know how.

Gun concealed in its holster, I returned to the stoop to wait for sleep or morning.

Marika eyed my leg. "Is there a gun strapped to your thigh or do you have a secret you have not told me?"

"Gun."

She held out her hand. "Give it to me. I am the bodyguard."

"You're pregnant."

"Maybe—who knows?"

Suddenly she turned an unflattering shade of green and puked on the step. Donk yelped and jumped sideways. We all hurried across the narrow street. None of us made eye contact with the step.

"I am okay. That is what happens when I do not eat." She glared at me. "Why do you say I cannot be your bodyguard if I am pregnant? Are you prejudiced against pregnant women?"

"I'm not prejudiced! I don't want you to get hurt. In case you hadn't noticed, bad stuff has a way of happening to me—and around me."

"That is why you have a bodyguard."

"Two."

She didn't look impressed. "Where is Elias, eh? Back in Greece, sipping on a frappe, looking at the girls. Meanwhile I am here with you, protecting you."

Given that her face looked like an oncoming storm, I didn't fancy pointing out that, boy, she'd really come through for us with the whole Baked Potato and Beaver fiasco. And where was she when the hookers were mocking me? Across the street with Donk, that's where. Not that I was bitter; she just wasn't good at the 'body' part of 'bodyguard'—or the 'guard' part. She was definitely more of an amusing sidekick.

"If you get hurt Takis will kill me," I pointed out.

She made a face. "I would spit in his food if he tried."

"Well, maybe Grandma wouldn't like a pregnant woman being my bodyguard. It's the next generation at stake."

Her eyes narrowed. "Did she say something to you?"

"No ..."

"Maybe something about how she does not want to have to pay me benefits—or pay me."

Donk did a double take. "Someone pays *you* money to be Katerina's bodyguard? Ha-ha."

"Baboulas. Baboulas pays me," Marika snapped, "because she knows I am good, and also because looking at me you would never

expect me to be a bodyguard. When I am out with Katerina everybody looks at us and sees two friends. I am a master of disguise. That is why I am an excellent bodyguard.”

“What do you do, sit on the bad guys?”

“Enough, you two!” I shoved my finger up in Marika’s face. “You can’t have the gun. It’s mine.” Then I honed in on my second target with that same finger. “And you—stop baiting Marika, especially about her weight.”

Marika slammed her hands onto her hips and sucked in her gut. “I am not fat—I am comfortable, just the way Takis likes me. And he knows women, let me tell you.”

There was an unhappy, eye-bleach-necessary thought. If Takis knew women then I was Santa Claus. And if I were Santa Claus, I’d pile us into my damn sleigh and ho-ho-ho back to freakin’ Greece.

The sun was coming up hard and fast. I had to pee and I’d already been pinched on the butt three times since Marika started arguing for custody of the gun. Day two in Italy was shaping up to be hot, painful, and wet if I didn’t find a public toilet soon.

Across the way, an elderly storekeeper trudged up to the store we’d used for shelter. He bypassed Marika’s puke, shoved one of those heavy old-fashioned keys into the lock, and vanished into his shop.

Somewhere below my belt my bladder reminded me that thirty was just around the corner and that it wasn’t as watertight as it used to be. I was this close to being mistaken for a fountain. Any second now tourists would start throwing coins at me.

Marika followed my gaze. Her eyes lit up. “Me first. The baby, you know.”

My mouth dropped open. *Now* she was playing the pregnant card?

Legs crossed, I jiggled on the spot and watched her disappear into the shop. Beside me, Donk shoved his hands into the pockets of his slouchy pants.

“Sometimes it’s good to be a man,” he declared. “The world is your toilet.”

“It could be mine, too, if I had a bendy straw right now.”

He stared at me, horrified.

Years later, Marika emerged, moving at the speed of tortoise now that her bladder was empty. Me, I flew past her and all but fell into the store. Overhead, a bell jingled. Shadows rushed me. There was light but it was filtered by the windows and awnings. The one sunbeam I spotted was filled with dust dancing the *tarantella*. Behind the cluttered counter, the shopkeeper peered at me over the top of his half-moon glasses. Genetics had grabbed his skull and chin and smushed them closer together so that his features bulged out of his face slightly, like warm ingredients in a Panini. He reeled off a rapid-

fire stream of Italian.

Like Spanish, Japanese, and Chinese, my knowledge of the Italian language was limited to food, and I didn't think asking for the bathroom-caine was going to help.

I held up one finger. "Excuse me." Then I stuck my head outside and asked Marika how she'd broached the bathroom subject. Young Italians spoke decent or better English, but this guy was middle-aged when Pompeii went under.

"Like this." Marika pointed to her crotch and did the gotta-pee dance. When Marika wiggled, all of Marika wiggled.

Yeah, no. I wasn't doing that.

I went back in, looked at the elderly man, and tried to look desperate and friendly. "May I please borrow your bathroom?"

The human pressed-sandwich stared at me for a moment, then he wordlessly pointed to the back of the shop.

Two minutes later I walked out a newer, more terrified woman. Peeing went well, but then I'd caught sight of Bloody Mary in the mirror.

The storekeeper looked up from his open book. "Better?" he asked in accented English. Hallelujah.

I nodded and thanked him profusely.

"You are welcome." Dark, yellowing eyes peered at me over spectacles. "Do you want to buy a book?"

I opened my mouth and nothing came out.

He shook his head. "Americans. You think everywhere is McDonalds."

Indignation washed over me. "I'd buy a book but everything is in Italian, which I can't read. Not only that, but I don't have any money. Zero. Zip. Zilch." I grabbed my skirt hem, gave it a shake, revealed a mile of leg and gun.

To quote Scooby Doo: Ruh roh!

Panini Face ogled the weapon, or maybe just my legs. His attitude changed instantly, from indignation and European superiority to faint disgust and deference. "Your package is in the back."

I scrambled to pull my dress back into place. "Package?"

"You are Mario's girl—yes?"

"Mario?"

He wagged his finger. "Very good. Discreet. I can see why he sent you. You will not need to use that—" he nodded to the secret strapped to my leg "—here. Everything is in order."

"Huh? Mario? Package?"

"Wait. I will get it for you."

A smart person, having concluded their business, would have excused herself and exited the bookstore. Not me. Apparently I was a

special kind of idiot, so I stuck around. Less than thirty seconds later he reappeared with what looked like a brown paper-wrapped brick tied with jute twine. Very retro.

“Tell Mario—” he started.

The bell over the door tinkled as trouble burst into the shop. I knew it was trouble because I instantly recognized the two bozos, and I was sure neither was here for a book. Baked Potato zeroed in on the elderly shopkeeper. He rattled off something in Italian, then his gaze slide sideways and bashed into me.

“You!” Baked Potato said, not looking happy to see me. “What are you doing here?”

“She is Mario’s girl,” said the shopkeeper. “She came for the package.”

They all looked at me.

The rest of the conversation happened in Italian. Probably it went something like this: “Mario doesn’t have a girl, unless it’s a working girl,” Baked Potato possibly said.

“Or a dead working girl in his basement,” Beaver probably said.

“Sure he does,” the shopkeeper might have said. “That is her right there.”

Here they looked at me again, and the way they looked at me wasn’t hospitable. It was downright Persians staring down King Leonidas at Thermopylae.

Baked Potato and Beaver didn’t have guns.

Baked Potato and Beaver had knives that managed to gleam, even in the thin light.

I had a gun.

In a game of Knives, Guns, and Other Assorted Weapons, a gun beat knives.

But I couldn’t do it. My hand froze at my hip as cautionary tales floated to the surface. Toddlers accidentally gunning down friends and family. Evil feigning crazy to slay kids in schools, in movie theaters, in clubs.

I could outrun a knife. They couldn’t outrun a gun in this tight space.

Heart dancing in my throat, I said, “Be seein’ ya.”

Stealing Mario’s—whoever he was—package wasn’t part of the plan. It just sort of happened that way. That flight-or-fight response makes a body do crazy things, like race out of a bookstore in Italy with a stolen package under one arm when there are knives slashing the air to dusty ribbons.

Across the narrow street, Marika spotted me. Her eyes slid to the package under my arm, the desperation on my face. She elbowed Donk. “Run!”

They ran. Donk loped away on his teenage sticks with Marika in hot pursuit.

Without checking to see if I was being chased by Baked Potato and Beaver, I took off after them.

Once upon a time I'd fantasized about visiting Italy.

This trip was nothing like that fantasy. There was too much running and not nearly enough eating.

Chapter 5

MARIKA PLASTERED herself to the side of a bank, panting. “I have to stop. Go on without me. Save yourselves.”

I stopped. A quick glance around revealed no sign of our pursuers, if they’d even tried. “I think we’re good.”

Up ahead, Donk stopped, too. He pulled off his ball cap, smoothed his hair, stuffed it back on his head, bill artfully twisted to the back. Trying to look cool, he slouched over to see what was “s’up.”

Marika eyed the package under my arm. “Food?”

“Could be,” I said. “Probably it’s books.”

“Books,” she said. “I ran for books?”

“What kind of books?” Donk wanted to know.

“Italian books, most likely. Do you read?” Because Donk didn’t strike me as someone who’d ever picked up a book.

“All the time,” he said.

I stared at him.

“What?”

I shook my head. “What do you read?”

He shrugged. “Everything.”

The world never failed to surprise me.

“Hurry up,” Marika said.

Around us the city was coming to life. Coming to life meant more people. More people meant we could get lost more easily in a crowd, but the number of eyes on us would increase exponentially.

I tore open one end of the package. Stacked inside, packed tightly, I discovered bundles of euros, banded together. I pulled a couple out, inspected them. Crisp. New. Recently printed in someone’s basement.

Donk whistled.

“The good news is that we’ve got money,” I told them. “The bad news is that I don’t think it’s real.”

“Looks real to me,” Marika said, peering at the stack of freshly printed bills. “I bet the train station will believe it is real, too.”

“We can’t spend it!” I hissed.

“Why not?”

“Because there are laws about that kind of thing! If the cops find out we’ll go to prison—possibly forever.” I’d heard stories about Greek prisons. They were dank, dire places where it was standing room only and there was a curious absence of rats.

Marika looked miffed. “Airport?”

“They’ll shoot us on the spot.”

“Bus station?”

“Too risky.”

“That’s a lot of Ben-ja-mins,” Donk said, eyeing the Monopoly money. “We could buy a car.”

Marika flicked his ear. “That is a great idea—except, no it is not. That is the worst idea I have ever heard.”

It wasn’t any worse than her train station idea, but I kept my mouth shut. “No identification,” I told Donk. “And if the cops stop us we’re screwed.”

He folded his arms and put on a snooty know-it-all expression. “There are ways to buy a car without identification. You think I’m just a kid, yes? I have ears and eyes. I watch movies. Give me some of that money and I will get a car for us.”

Some crazy person—possibly me—wordlessly handed him a short stack. There had to be ten thousand fake euros there—easy. Plenty of cash to score a semi-decent vehicle from a shady character hawking contraband from under a bridge, or wherever dodgy Italians did their dirty deals.

“Go forth and prosper, young Padawan,” I told him.

He stuffed the money into his pocket, saluted me, and took off.

Marika didn’t look happy. “We will never see that money or him again.”

“I have faith in him.”

“That makes one of us—the stupid one.”

“The kid managed to stowaway on a plane, and not just any plane but one doing spy work.”

“My sons could do that.”

“I bet they could buy a car illegally, too.”

Her eyes shined with maternal pride. “I bet they could, too. They are so much like their father.”

I shuddered at the thought. Takis is one of those people who should have been shoved off the family tree’s tire swing. “He’ll be back with a car.”

“What are we going to do until then?” Her gaze bounced from the money to my eyes and back down again. “I plan better on a full stomach.”

She had a point. “I guess Mario wouldn’t mind too much if we used some of his money. It’s not like it’s real anyway.”

Thirty minutes later we were back to waiting for Donk to show up with a car, only this time we were waiting with food and hot coffee. My

tiny handful of former lovers—and my shitty ex-fiancé—would be horrified to know this Italian coffee was the best thing I'd ever put in my mouth. And this pastry I was cramming into my mouth? Otherworldly. Grandma could take lessons, and she was no slouch in the kitchen.

Grandma. Thinking about how she was in the hospital while I was stuck here made me halt my chewing, but only for a second. I wouldn't be any use to her if I passed out, weak from hunger.

"How long does it take to get scurvy or beriberi?" I asked Marika.

"What is that? I have never heard of those things."

I filled her in, with all the gory details. None of it slowed down her eating. When it came to food, a probably-pregnant Marika was a well-oiled eating machine.

"That is disgusting," she said, hand diving into the paper bag for another gooey pastry. She looked at the confection in her hand. "What is this? Do not answer that. All that matters is sugar."

I looked around for our benefactor, the Armani Hobo, but he wasn't around. Not that I could see, anyway. He'd vanished after bequeathing me his gun, which, now that I thought about it, couldn't be good. What if it was a murder weapon? There could be a dead body out there, riddled with this gun's bullets.

Maybe he wanted to frame me. Who better to pin a crime on than an illegal immigrant?

A car horn beeped. Naples was a city where there was more honking than a flock of zombie geese, but this one stood out. Probably because it belonged to the most perfect specimen of fiberglass and metal I'd ever laid eyes on. It was Italian. A sports car. A fast one.

My gaze cut to the driver.

Yikes!

My heart dropped into my pretty espadrilles. Somehow—and it couldn't be a good somehow—Donk had procured a Ferrari.

"Get in," he called out to us. "The fat one sits in the back."

Marika hopped up. "This food is so good, I do not even care that he just called me fat."

A somebody-please-love-me smile appeared on the teenager's face. "You like?"

Like? No. Love? Hell yes. I just wanted to pet the smooth, red paint job. I wanted to lay across it in a bikini and devour a bacon cheeseburger while someone off-screen sprayed me with a hose.

He shone when I told him so, omitting the part about the cheeseburger and hose.

"How did you get a Ferrari?" I asked, thinking it was a prudent question. "Did you steal it?"

"No!"

“Did you pay for it?”

Guilt flashed across his face. “Maybe ...”

“So then it’s stolen?”

“Do you have to say it like that? It makes me sound like a bad person. You told me to get a car.”

My mouth dropped open, then snapped shut. “I told you to buy a car.”

“That’s not what you—”

I held up my hand, palm facing him. Technically I gave him what Greeks call the *moutsas*, which has a dual meaning. One on the hand you could be rubbing poop in their faces; on the other you could be accusing them of having a chronic self-love problem of the masturbatory kind. I wasn’t doing either; my open palm meant *talk to the hand*. He could flap his teenage gums all he wanted—I wasn’t listening.

“I’m driving,” I told him. His face fell. “Do you want to go to prison when this car is reported stolen—if it hasn’t been already—and the cops pull us over?”

“But—” he started.

“Back seat. Now.”

He mumbled something under his breath, in the place spouses and parents call the danger zone.

“Don’t start with me,” I barked. It struck me that, with or without kids, I was turning into my mother. That cheered me up. It meant the Makris side didn’t have the monopoly on my DNA. The shady side wasn’t inevitable, even though they had great cookies.

We piled into the Ferrari.

I glanced at my passengers. “Let’s ride.”

Five minutes later ...

“Let’s ride,” I said from the passenger seat.

Donk jammed his foot on the gas, ground through the gears. Like a cat meeting bathwater, the ultimate sports car shot up the street.

The Ferrari had a transmission designed to repel the average American driver. America is a country that produces drivers used to three choices on a gearshift: D, R, and P. A lot of us don’t know what the 1, 2, or N are there for. Decoration, probably. Pedals? Two was plenty. Stop and go. What more did we need? The Ferrari had too many numbers on the gearshift and, apart from the R, a conspicuous absence of the alphabet.

“This is too much like math,” I’d said before sliding out of the driver’s seat.

A cop rode past on a bicycle.

"They are coming for us!" Marika screamed from the back.

I glanced back. The cop vanished down the street without a second look. "Not that one."

The dashboard came equipped with GPS. I was scrolling through the map, trying to recall the name of the area just outside of Naples where wannabe counterfeiters went to learn their trade.

Marika stuck her head between the front seats. "What are you looking for?" When I told her she gasped. "Are you crazy?"

"Do you really think Hera and her merry band of douche-bags are going to let me back into Greece?"

"What is a douche-bag?"

I did my best to explain it.

In the driver's seat, Donk nodded. "My mama buys those in bulk."

We looked at him. Donk's mother was in porn. She probably bought a lot of things in bulk, like plastic sheets and antibiotics.

"The NIS is determined to get its way, which is why you two are dropping me off in ..." I jabbed a finger at the GPS. "...Giugliano in Campania. As long as I stay here and do Hera's bidding, you two should be able to get home just fine. When you get there the Family can decide what to do." Send a rescue team, hopefully.

Fear stabbed me in the chest again. Grandma was the head of the Family, the decision-maker. With her in the hospital, who was making the decisions? Last time she'd left me in charge. Not only had I managed to keep things running smoothish, but I also sorted out an argument between two sheep lovers. They'd sent me a huge woolen sweater as recompense. Now every time I saw the sweater thoughts of bestiality danced through my head. When I counted sheep, their fuzzy faces looked worried.

"No."

That was Marika. She looked less than happy and not even remotely cooperative, what with her arms crossed and her chin stuck out.

"Yes."

"No. I am your bodyguard. Where you go, I go. The boy can go home alone."

"Forget it," Donk said. "I like Italy. They make good cars and beautiful women."

"Greece makes cars," Marika said. "They are called donkeys."

I programmed the GPS and sat back. "This isn't a debate. This is how it is." I pointed at Marika first, then Donk. "I don't want to be responsible for your safety, so I'm taking you both out of the picture." The truth is I would have loved the company, but they were a liability. With them around I would always be calculating the odds of

them getting hurt into my every word and move. Besides, I was the one on Hera's shit list. She wouldn't care about Marika and Donk swinging back into Greece, as long as I remained behind to be her good doggie.

This was my problem. I had to solve it alone.

"Drive to Giugliano in Campania," I said.

Goodbye, Naples. Hello, Giugliano in Campania.

Okay, it was technically part of Naples. It's not that I'm brilliant and all knowing; I was armed with GPS, that's all.

Giugliano in Campania was clean, neat, beautiful.

Just kidding. It was a slum. The outer suburb of Naples was trash-central. Tumbleweeds of garbage rolling down the streets. Local artwork by graffiti artists. Strays with crooked teeth and crazy eyes. And that was just the dogs.

None of us had spoken since we'd blasted out of Naples proper. For sound effects we had the rustling of paper as we devoured every last scrap of food we'd procured in Naples. It felt good to be full again. On a full stomach I could do this—whatever this was.

Before long, Donk said, "Where now?"

Good question. "Anywhere."

He nodded and pulled the Ferrari over in a cobbled street near a bank of parked mopeds and motorcycles.

Heart heavy, stomach filled with rocks, I got out. I leaned on the open window.

"Go back to Greece. Let the family and Detective Melas know what's going on." Melas likely already knew, thanks to my call to Pappas, but it never hurt to double down. I'd take all the rescue teams I could get. "Do you still have some of that fake money?" I asked Donk. He nodded. The rest of the fake cash was still wrapped in its brown paper. I'd be putting it to use soon enough. This Mario, whoever he was, would be looking for his pretend money, so he was my starting point. Eventually we were bound to run into each other, especially once I started flashing his package around.

Click. The Ferrari's trunk door swung up. We stared open-mouthed as the Armani Hobo climbed out. He gave us two thumbs up and moseyed off into the harsh morning sun.

"Hey," I called out. "Who are you?"

He didn't turn around, just lifted his hand and waved. It was all very Clint Eastwood. We stood there gawking at him for several moments before reality sank back in.

I slapped the Ferrari on its flank, then immediately petted the

smooth paint and apologized. "Drive straight to Greece. Don't stop until you're home. You," I told Donk, "try not to insult her too much. And you," I said to Marika, "try not to hit him too much, okay?"

"I cannot promise that." She folded her arms.

Donk glared at her in the rearview mirror. "Get in the front. I can't see the road with you back there. You are big and round like the sun. You blot out everything."

I hid a smile behind my hand. I was going to miss them. God only knew what I was walking into. Quicksand, probably. When I was a kid quicksand was everywhere and inevitable, according to television. As an adult I'd encountered precisely none, which meant my quicksand time was coming—most likely here, in this not-that-smallish Italian trash paradise, filled to the brim, if stories were true, with Camorra.

"Scram," I said. Neither of them understood the word, but my intent was clear. The Ferrari peeled away, gears complaining loudly about the driver.

Brown paper package of Monopoly money gripped under my arm, gun snoozing against my thigh, I took stock of the street. A string of cafes and other eateries. A church—or cathedral—close by.

Which way was up?

Completely clueless about which way to go, I took off in the same direction as Armani Hobo. That guy was up to something, I just knew it. Whether he was a good witch or a bad witch was up for debate. He'd shot at the bad guys in the alley, then he'd tossed his gun in the garbage for me and not some kindergartener to find. He'd led me to bookstore's step. Then he'd secretly hitched a ride to Camorra-central in the back of a most-likely stolen Ferrari.

Gawd, I really hoped Marika and Donk made it back to Greece in one piece.

I rounded a corner and entered an alley. A quick scan showed it was empty. No Armani Hobo. Another block later I stumbled into a second alley. This one was *occupato* by a couple of dealers negotiating with a respectable member of no community ever.

"Any of you know a guy named Mario?" I asked them.

It was risky, but then everything about this was risky. If I could find a non-risky thing to do I'd be doing that instead.

One of the dealers pointed to himself. "Mario." Then he pointed to the other guy. "Mario." The customer glanced from me to them, then back to me again. He jabbed a finger at his chest. "Mario."

Great, so Mario was a common name around these parts.

"Are any of you super?"

They blinked at me. Maybe they didn't have Nintendo here.

"Inside joke," I said, backing out of the alley.

Sunlight hit me square in the eyes. Maybe I could use some of

Mario's fake cash to score a pair of sunglasses. I'd be sure to keep the receipt and send the store real money as soon as I was safely back on Greek soil and stones. Hand shielding my eyes, I scanned the street for those spinning postcard racks that are ubiquitous outside every souvenir shop on the planet. Where there were postcards there would be sunglasses. It's one of the laws of modern nature.

I spotted one in the distance and adjusted my course.

The store was what you'd expect, filled to overflowing with mostly useless junk, the city's name emblazoned on front. Every trinket was there so you'd have something to remind of that one time you went to that one not-that-interesting place, elevated to a higher, more interesting pinnacle, simply because it was in Italy and not Cincinnati or Milwaukee. The cashier had a head like a lemon that had been baked in a too hot oven for too long. Some thoughtful person had then jammed a pair of clove eyes into the skin, plopped a cotton ball wig on top and spray-painted it a harsh, glossy black. She grunted as I inched past.

Sunglasses were located on a second spinning rack near the front of the store. I tried on a dozen pairs, peering into the tiny mirror each time, before settling on a pair of aviators with black lenses. I carried them up to the counter and, with what I hoped was a steady hand, gave the cashier a fifty-euro note. Wordlessly, she accepted the cash and immediately held it up to the light.

My stomach clenched. My bladder began to complain about a growing space issue. Tonight I'd be in prison, scrambling for rats. Should have had Marika work out my inmate name.

The lemon whipped out a pen and slashed a line across the bill's face. Not a literal face; euros don't wear famous faces. Instead they have styles of architecture. The fifty features the Renaissance. She sniffed. Reluctantly, the cash vanished into an ancient cash register. The over-baked citrus dumped change on the counter.

Impressed by the moneymaker's considerable skills, I shoved the sunglasses down on my nose and skedaddled. Not only did I have sunglasses, but I was also in possession of some genuine cash, thanks to the souvenir store. I didn't feel bad about exchanging some of it for a steaming latte with a sprinkle of chocolate.

Outside once more, I looked around for the Armani Hobo but there was no sign of him. He was probably voiding his bladder someplace inappropriate. He seemed to be good at that. When he was over being a hobo he'd make an excellent centerpiece in a small European town's fountain.

A moped pulled up beside me. When I saw who was perched on back, I just about dropped my latte. Baked Potato and Beaver had found me. They were cheerful about the situation.

Baked Potato grinned at me. "What is that thing when something happens, and it is a strange thing that it happened because it has something to do with another thing?"

"A coincidence," I said. "The word you're looking for is *coincidence*."

He snapped his fingers. "A coincidence." His grin died a swift death. "This isn't one of those."

"We followed you," Beaver said, like I was too stupid to figure it out.

"So I see. Busy here. Can't stay and chat." I wagged my fingers at them. "Toodle-oo." Off I trotted down the street.

The moped cruised alongside me. Sheesh. Some people couldn't take a hint. Both bozos were watching me.

"Are those new sunglasses?" Beaver wanted to know. "Nice."

Baked Potato wasn't interested in sunglasses. "Where did you get money, eh? You told us you had nothing."

"I found a twenty on the street," I said. "Now go away."

Thanks to my excellent peripheral vision, I saw Baked Potato make a face.

"Lucky," he said.

"That's my middle name. My mother was a Jackie Collins fan."

"Really?"

"No."

"Then why—"

"Go away," I said. "You're harassing me."

"This?" He made another face. "This is nothing. This is friendly. This is what Italian men do when they see a pretty woman."

Whatever I was right now it wasn't pretty. The woman in the store window's reflection had been something conjured straight out of a Tim Burton movie. I was someone's nightmare—possibly mine.

"I think maybe you spent some of Marco's money," he went on. "I see you still have his package. Marco does not like it when people take his things."

I hugged it tighter. They couldn't have it. This pretend money was my ticket out of Italy.

"Leave me alone or I'll scream."

"So scream. The Camorra owns this city. They love the sound of screaming."

The Camorra is the Naples area's organized crime. They're like the Mafia, only more criminal and less organized.

"My family is in organized crime, too," I said in what sounded an awful lot to me like a sad attempt at one-upmanship.

"American Mafia. Ha!" Baked Potato mumbled something, then he said, "That was my Don Corleone imitation. You like?" He spat on the

ground without waiting on my answer. "I spit on Sicilians."

I winced. Camorra or no Camorra, you didn't spit on Sicilians. Probably it was best not to even think "spit" and "Sicilians" in the same sentence.

"Not the American side of my family tree," I told him. "The Greek side."

"Yeah, yeah, you said some name we never heard of earlier."

"Katerina Makri."

"Still never heard of her."

"We never heard of her." Beaver couldn't help tacking on his echo.

"I bet your buddy Mario has. If he hasn't then he's not anybody important."

So help me God and gods, I was cobbling together a plan as I went along. I needed to find Mario and these two bozos knew him. Ergo, if I tweaked their noses hard enough they might take me to meet with him. There was a good chance they'd chain me to the back of that Vespa and drag me there, but there were worse ways to travel. I'd already flown first class next to Takis, and I'd been drugged twice by my own family and tossed onto a plane. At least this would be a travel method of my choosing.

"Mario is Mario. He knows everybody worth knowing."

"Then he'll know the Makris family name." I waved the package at them. "Take me to your leader. I have his money."

Neither of the bozos looked happy about that. "He is expecting us to deliver it."

"You'll still be delivering it. I'll be holding it, that's all."

They exchanged marginally less unhappy glances. This wasn't their plan but they were thinking as far as plans went it wasn't so bad. In their heads they'd be bringing in the money and the American bimbo who'd dared to steal it. I'd be a twofer. Fine. Let them think that. Their plan and my plan were two different plans, but they didn't need to know that yet. Mostly I didn't know what my plan actually was yet, but it involved this Mario, whoever he was.

Baked Potato shoved his phone up against his ear. He released a rapid-fire burst of Italian that made Greek seem like the slow children traffic signs warned you about. A moment later he thrust the phone back into his pocket, then he turned around and made an obscene-in-several-languages hand gesture at Beaver.

"Mario wants his money," he said. "You ride with me. That one can walk."

"Why do I have to walk?" Beaver whined. "You're the fat one."

Baked Potato ignored him. "Get on."

I climbed on the back of the moped. With Baked Potato on the front there wasn't much room for a regular sized person.

He shot me a worried look. "Is that a gun or are you happy to see me?"

"I'm not happy to see you."

He laughed like I'd just made a joke. Figures. Half the time I didn't take me seriously either. The gun, though, that was pretty serious. I was suddenly glad I hadn't played my loaded hand in the bookstore. I might have to use it soon enough, and I'd rather it was a surprise.

My stomach turned sour at the thought of having to use a gun on anything with a pulse, even if they were out to get me.

Chapter 6

MARIO WAS YOUNG.

Mario was hot, delicious beefcake.

Mario was also so light in the loafers that he was a walking, talking David Blaine act. Not that there's anything wrong with that; how other people live, and who they are, is none of my business. When it is my business is when it's my fiancé's fish bone crammed down a starving male diner's mouth. Way back when I was still engaged to Todd, I caught him playing Hide the Boner, using his mouth as a hiding place.

Not that I'm bitter. Much.

"Oh my God," Mario said in high-pitched English, delivered with a garlicky Italian twist. "I love those shoes! Where did you get them?"

I mean, my shoes were nice but they weren't scream-worthy. Baby Dimitri's shop sold the same shoes as fifty other stores in the area. But maybe Greece's fashion didn't stretch as far as the Naples area.

"From a Godfather of the Night named Baby Dimitri."

He laughed. It sounded like crystal in a blender. "Baby Dimitri! I have heard of him. He killed his whole family, or so they say."

So they did say, but he had a living sister—or half-sister—and his nephew Donk.

"They do say that," I said.

"He sells shoes, you say?"

"And souvenirs."

He tapped his chin thoughtfully with one finger. "Is the store his cover?"

"Maybe. Mostly I think it's just his store." Baby Dimitri's favorite spot in the world seemed to be his shop's front doorstep, directly across from the beach. Sooner or later every pair of boobs in the world swam past.

"I like it," he said. "Very provincial. The gangster who chooses to spend his days at a shoe and souvenir shop. What do you think, did he kill his family?"

"I don't think about it. I just shop there."

Mario circled me, tapping on his chin thoughtfully. "And who are you that you buy shoes from a gangster?" He paused to wave a finger at me. "They say you took my money."

We were standing inside the cavernous living room of a Eurotrash mansion. Lots of palm trees outside. Inside decorated with too many

reflective surfaces and a herd of cows worth of black leather. Glass featured prominently. Silver was the precious metal of choice.

“One, it’s not real money. And two, I didn’t mean to take it. I tried to tell the shopkeeper I’d never heard of you. But it all worked out.”

He raised a perfectly arched eyebrow. Somebody manscaped. “What?”

“I only took it to get to you—or someone like you.”

“Why?”

“I want to learn.”

I was going to hell, wasn’t I? Lying to this Mario guy. Conning the bad guys. Stealing from the same bad guys. Italy was turning out to be bad for my mortal soul.

Mario went back to circling. Very sharkish of him. And here I was in my diver’s cage, wondering if the bars were going to hold when he finally lunged.

“Learn what? Tell me.”

“How to make money.”

“Get a job,” he said.

“I mean *make* money.”

“You are talking counterfeiting, yes? Let me tell you something about counterfeiting. Here we are famous for it because we are the best. People come to Giugliano from all over to learn how to make close-to-perfect euros. But making money is not a big moneymaker. Can you believe that?”

I couldn’t, and I made a sort of scared snorting sound as I shook my head.

“We use the money to buy things. Countries. Wars. Power. Fake, worthless money to buy the things that matter. People in poor countries do not care that the money is fake. That money you took? Not fake money.” He stopped directly in front of me, and got right up in my face. “**THAT WAS REAL MONEY! MY REAL MONEY!**” He flicked the sunglasses off my head. “And you bought those sunglass with my real money.”

Real money? Yikes. “They were under twenty euros,” I said in a tiny voice.

“And the rest of the money?”

“I used some of it for a family emergency. The rest is still in the packet.”

“What emergency?”

Great—now I had to lie again and the way things had been going I didn’t have a story to explain the missing euros. They were supposed to be fake. Someone was supposed to be able to whip up another fresh batch.

I whipped the change out of my pocket. “Here’s your change from

the sunglasses and the coffee. I had to have a coffee, otherwise I'd go Godzilla on your country."

Shrug. "All civilized people drink coffee in the morning. I forgive you for the coffee." He held the smaller bills up to the light. "Fake," he declared.

Fake money was real, and real money was fake. What was wrong with this place?

"Huh," I said, "how 'bout that. What are the odds?"

"You gave away my real money for counterfeit money. Do you know what you just did?"

"Gave away your real money for counterfeit money?" I ventured.

"Very clever. You are, how you say, smart ... for a stupid person. You have made me the laughing stock of Giugliano de Campania. From now on I will be known as the man who was too stupid to know he was being swindled."

"I don't get it. I mean I bought those sunglasses. It's not like that old buzzard in the souvenir store knew it was your real money."

"Of course she knew," he said. "That is my ex wife."

My mind boggled. "Arranged marriage?"

He gave me a blank look. "No. Why would you think that?"

Oh, no reason. She was around when Mussolini was storming Greece, and Mario looked younger than me. I couldn't imagine what they had in common except diapers and pudding.

I shook my head, not wanting to dig a deeper hole. "You don't seem her type." His type came with a penis, I would have bet money on it. Not my money; but his money—sure.

"In her youth, Gina was a voracious lover. She and her store belong to a famous Camorra family."

Eww ... and uh-oh.

"Everybody who walks out of her shop walks out with something fake," he went on. "Look at your sunglasses."

I tugged them off my head, peered at the label. Huh. My Ray-Ban lookalikes were Hay-Beans. What was I expecting for less than twenty euro?

"I bought them for the style and price, not the name."

"Everything in that store is counterfeit, including the money. And now everyone is laughing at me."

"Already?"

"Giugliano de Campania is small. Everybody talks."

So basically it was like Greece. I winced. "Sorry."

"Oh, that makes everything okay then." He swished his hand through the air dramatically. The guy was one heartbeat away from jazz hands. I hoped he wouldn't use them on me; otherwise I'd die laughing, when I was pretty sure this was supposed to be a somber

moment. "Perfect. Wonderful. Amazing."

Somebody ate a thesaurus for breakfast. "I could tell them it had nothing to do with you."

His chest heaved. He waved me off. "No. It is too late. The damage is already done. There is only one way to regain my honor now." He turned away, swishing his hips to the far side of the room, elbow cupped in one hand, while the other hand massaged his forehead, like I was a hideously untalented ballerina turning his Swan Lake into a Swine Pen. "Your grandmother is Katerina Makri, yes?"

"Yes ..." I said carefully, wondering where he'd hidden the trap.

"And your name is?"

"Katerina Makris."

"Does she have many grandchildren?"

"A few."

"Grandsons, granddaughters?"

"I'm the only granddaughter." I eyed him suspiciously. "Why?"

He shrugged prettily. "No reason. Come on, let me show you around."

The feeling I had about this was cold, damp, oily, and originated somewhere between my diaphragm and small intestine.

"No need," I said. "Seen one mansion, seen 'em all. My family has one."

Mario looked worried for a moment. He bit his lip. "Bigger than mine?"

"Bigger. A lot bigger."

"How much bigger?"

"Four times bigger, at least."

His expression darkened.

"But," I said quickly, "my grandmother lives in a crummy shack in the courtyard."

He perked up. "The great Baboulas lives in a shack?"

"With an outhouse."

"Outhouse? What is this outhouse?"

"An outdoor bathroom."

"Where everyone can watch?"

"No, it's in a wooden hut."

He thought about it a moment, then tipped back his head and laughed. "Baboulas shits outside."

Hey now ... "Technically in an outhouse."

"But an outhouse outside?"

"Well ... yes."

He snapped his fingers, pointed to me. "Where do you live?"

I didn't like where this was going. "With Grandma."

"So you shit outside, too! Staying here will be a luxury compared

to your Grandma's outhouse."

Wait a minute! "Stay here? I'm not staying here."

"You want to learn the business—no?"

Ruh-roh. He had me there. "Yes."

"Then you will stay here. Leave it to Mario. I will take care of Baboulas's only granddaughter. When you leave here you will know everything there is to know about making money, *capishe*?"

Casa de Crackpot wasn't so bad. My room only had two locks, both on the outside. On the inside it had a grand total of—count 'em—zero locks. There was a slider lock on the bathroom door, but one good kick from a busted geriatric hip would send the mechanism flying. Mario took his security seriously—as in you seriously had no security unless you were him.

I wasn't him. We both liked men, and that was it.

No, I couldn't explain his former marriage to Madam Citrus. If it hadn't been arranged it was definitely one of convenience—although I couldn't figure out for whose convenience. Not that I cared.

Okay, maybe I cared a bit. Italy was a living, breathing soap opera, with a melodic language and amazing food. I wanted to know why the beautiful young gay man married an aged human fruit. There was a tasty story there, I just knew it.

I plopped down on the bed in the same clothes I'd been wearing for over twenty-four hours straight. Before I could pass out there was a knock at the door. It flew open before I had a chance to say, *Oh my God, what do you want?*

Baked Potato stuck his head in. "The boss wants to show you something. He said he meant to earlier but forgot."

"What?"

He repeated himself, looking slightly peeved.

"I heard you the first time," I said. "I meant what does he want to show me."

He grinned. I didn't like the look of it. Too many teeth for a human mouth. "You will see."

"Just tell me."

The grin died. "I don't know, but I bet it will be good. I know Mario."

Fine. Whatever. Anything to hurry this along. I wanted to have enough to take to Hera and the rest of the NIS as quickly as humanly possible, while gathering any intel I could about Dad or my uncle's activities in the region.

Baked Potato grabbed my elbow.

“Unhand me, you brute,” I said.

“Eh?”

“Let go.”

“You feel nice. Soft.”

“That’s all the oil. I haven’t showered since yesterday morning.”

“I had a bath on Saturday.”

I gawked at him.

“What? I have one every Saturday, whether I need one or not.”

“Dude,” I said. Not that I’m a germaphobe or a clean freak, but it was Italy and it was still technically summer.

He muttered something in Italian that made me wish I at least understood their profanity. Using my elbow, he steered me along the wide, airy hallway, down some steps, along another hallway, down some more steps, and out into a courtyard that was about an eighth of the size of Grandma’s yard. No screaming, playing children, no dogs, no cats, and no cute goat. Like the front, lots of palm trees. What Mario also had were a couple of what looked like rent boys sprawled out beside the fancy pool. They were wearing a lot of olive oil and not nearly enough swimwear.

Baked Potato followed my gaze. “Mario’s stepsons.”

“He’s married?”

“To his second wife.”

“I don’t suppose his first wife had sons?”

“Three.”

“And did they ... look like that?”

“Like that, but younger.”

It was all so clear now what Mario saw in the lemon lady. Oh well. Not my circus, not my butt-monkeys. I just had to be nice to the ringleader so I could make it back to my three rings and the *sirtaki*-dancing chimpanzees I called family. I couldn’t help thinking about Marika and Donk. Where were they now? The trip would take a day—easy. That’s if they didn’t get stopped. If the NIS weren’t waiting with guns and surly looks. If they managed to squeak through one of Greece’s leaky border holes. If hundreds of thousands of refugees and illegal immigrants could do it, then Donk and Marika could. Probably. If they didn’t bicker their way into the wrong person’s attention.

Baked Potato led me through another door. This one exited at the back of the property and opened into a massive yard that didn’t quit until it hit beach.

“The nearest neighbors are over there.” Baked Potato pointed to a dot in the distance. Translation: the neighbors were really far away. Not at all convenient if your servants forgot to buy sugar and you needed to ask for a cup. Second translation: you could scream and shoot guns here and the neighbors would never know.

Crystalline water lapped at the shore. If I had to die this would be a nice place to exit. "Are you taking me to sleep with the fishes?"

"What does that mean? I don't know what that means. Do I look like a guy who knows if fishes sleep? All I know about fishes is that they taste good with lemon and garlic. This way." He nodded towards the shore.

Up close the waterfront was pitted and pocket with shallow rock pools. Obviously private property because they weren't filled with litter. Baked Potato shoved me toward what looked like a cave—mostly because it was a cave.

"Inside you will find the thing Mario wants you to see."

"You want me to go in there?"

"Yes."

I held out my hand. "Flashlight? It looks dark in there. What if there's a sea monster."

"There is no sea monster."

"There could be. That's the sea and that's a cave." I pointed to each location. "If I were a sea monster this cave would look like a pretty sweet home."

"No sea monster." He grabbed my elbow again and shoved me inside. "In."

The cave was definitely a cave, narrow, shallow, and dripping. The walls were wet. From the salty line on the walls, I'd say the water regularly reached neck level in here when the tide was high. Occasionally higher.

There was one more thing in the cave. Pushed to the back was a cage. The rock formed three of the sides. The fourth side was made up of thick steel bars, buried top and bottom in the rock.

It wasn't empty.

I shrieked.

Chapter 7

FOUR HANDS REACHED for me from inside the cage.

I screamed some more—inside my head.

So much for the cavalry arriving in about a day or so, give or take a few hours.

“Help!” Marika screeched at me. She looked desperate. They both did. “I am stuck in here with the crying boy and a bucket.”

Donk was red-eyed. I felt bad for the kid. Following his uncle’s orders to shadow me so he could learn about organized crime was shaping up to be one misadventure after another. He’d be better off sticking with high school.

Baked Potato looked at me. “What did she say?”

I told him.

“Two buckets,” Baked Potato said. “We are not animals here in Italy. And they have bottled water. Tell me how many other kidnappers would give hostages bottled water? Not many, I don’t think.”

I relayed his words to Marika, who chopped at her groin with both hands. An oh-so polite Greek invitation for Baked Potato to suck on an appendage she didn’t have. There’s something extra offensive about inviting someone to partake of something you don’t have. It’s like inviting company over for a grill-out then telling them there’s no meat.

“Do you still have the gun?” Marika wanted to know. “Shoot him!”

“I can’t just shoot him.”

“Why not? Takis would.”

“I’m not Takis! I can’t just shoot an unarmed man.”

She thrust her hand between the bars. “Give it to me. I will do it.”

“What is her problem?” Baked Potato glanced from her to me. “Is it that time of the month?”

Now I definitely wanted to shoot him. Too bad we were in a dimly lit cave where the chances of me missing were decent and the chance of a bullet ricocheting off the stone walls and hitting someone else were excellent.

“She’s wondering why they’re here. You’ve got me, so just let them go.”

He pointed to his pockets. “No keys. Mario wants them here, and Mario is the boss.”

“What’s it like being a lackey?”

“Lackey?”

My explanation bordered on derogatory, with extra emphasis on his tiny manhood and inability to perform sexually. It was a low blow but I was at peace with that, under the circumstances.

Baked Potato laughed it off. “The benefits are too good.”

What benefits? Like Greece, Italy had socialized medicine.

When I asked, he said, “I can kill anyone I want, commit any crime, and I will not go to prison. Not for long, anyway,” he added.

They were pretty sweet benefits ... if, oh, you were a criminal. I wasn’t impressed. My family had similar benefits.

“Why does Mario want them? You’ve already got me.”

“Insurance,” he said. “If you don’t behave ... bang-bang.”

I gulped. “If I promise to behave will you let them go now?”

“No.”

It was worth a shot.

“Mario says you are free to come and go—you are not a prisoner. But they are. If you are a naughty girl these two will suffer. Do you want them to suffer? I don’t think so.”

I really didn’t want them to suffer—not even Donk who could be an insufferable little dweeb. “Can’t they stay in the house?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because the house is for guests.” He pointed to me then Marika and Donk. “Guest. Prisoner. Prisoner. Do you see what is different?”

“Is it the cage?” I said. “It’s the cage, isn’t it?”

His fingers snapped around my wrist. “Time to go. The boss wants to take you somewhere.”

I twisted my wrist until his hold broke, and raced over to the cage. “I’ll get you out of here,” I told Marika and Donk in Greek. Marika looked wild-eyed and terrified.

“When you do, I will cut out that one’s heart with a potato peeler,” she said.

“Deal,” I said. And it was. She could use the mansion’s whole kitchen on him for all I cared.

Maybe it was my imagination, but I’d swear on Baked Potato, Beaver, and Mario’s lives that I caught the flutter of a black coat behind the rocks as we picked our way back to Casa de Eurotrash.

Somewhere out there, the Armani Hobo was watching.

To be or not to be afraid, that was the question.

Surprisingly, the part of Giugliano I’d seen earlier was the good part. The part I was seeing now was the rest of it. The tumbleweeds of

garbage had messier friends. The stench of rotting refuse engaging in air combat with gasoline and diesel fumes. Graffiti marked the faces, sides, and backs of most buildings. I didn't know what any of it said but I was willing to bet it wasn't romantic poetry.

"You like?" Mario said from the driver's seat.

We were wedged inside his Pagani sports car, which was the offspring of the Batmobile and Herbie. Mario was driving at the speed of drying paint. A snail passed us, and a disabled guy on crutches. During a zombie apocalypse, Mario would be one of the first to die. He'd never be able to outdrive their shambling.

"It's very ..." I hunted for a word that wasn't synonymous with *dump* or *poop*. "... Italian."

He scoffed. "It is, how you say, a shit hole. A toilet. That is what my city is now. This is why I live by the beach where the air is clean and I can throw the garbage in the ocean when there is a strike."

Uh, okay ... "You could always move. I hear other parts of Italy are nice."

"And leave my city? Never. My family's history is here."

He rounded a corner slowly. Around me, the car wept for its wasted potential. If ever there was a person built for a Buick it was Mario.

We stopped outside a beat-up warehouse smothered in graffiti, sitting in the middle of an ocean of trash. Mario pulled out his phone, fired off a command in Italian, then ended the call. We sat. We waited.

The doors opened slowly. A couple of boys about Donk's age burst out armed with brooms. They swept the garbage aside, clearing a space big enough for a car. When it was done, Mario backed up the Pagani and parked in the newer, cleaner parking slot.

"Inside," he said.

Like a good doggie, I followed. Probably I could have made a run for it, but I was worried I'd drown in the ocean of garbage. Also, I couldn't do anything with Marika and Donk locked up in the sea cave, and Mario knew it.

The warehouse was home to one massive offset printer and a laptop balanced on a tall, narrow desk. Perched on a swiveling barstool at the computer, an elderly man in loose gray pants and a wife beater stabbed at the keyboard with one finger. His nose resembled a root vegetable with a butt crack. He'd slicked his salt-and-pepper hair sideways, fooling no one. He fired off a stream of angry Italian and flipped off the laptop with both middle fingers raised. When he spotted us he stormed over, firing more angry words at Mario. The only part I understood was *Microsoft* and *Windows 10*.

Mario brushed him aside, sashayed over to the laptop. A few

reboots later, the massive printer began to rumble.

"Come and look," Mario said to me. I followed him to the far end of the printer, where rows of freshly hatched fifty-euro notes were emerging. He plucked a handful off the conveyor. "Here, you want some money? Have some money." He nodded to the elderly man. "This is Aldo. Aldo does not speak English."

"Aldo speaks English just fine," Aldo said. "But I prefer to speak money."

"Here. Money for you, too," Mario said. He bundled up the next few rows and thrust them at Aldo.

Aldo folded his arms. He didn't look happy. "Real money."

"Funny story," Mario said. "I had some real money coming to me, but this one spent it."

"Hey!" I said. "I only spent maybe twenty euros."

"And the ten thousand you gave your friend, eh?"

Well ... there was that. I handed the money he'd just given me back to him. "Consider this a down payment."

Mario scowled. Not Aldo. His face split in two, yellowing teeth glowing like freshly steamed corn.

"Heh. She got you there, Super Mario," he said.

"Don't call me that," Mario said.

"Super Mario," Aldo repeated. Then he hummed the little Nintendo ditty. In the dark warehouse, it was a thing of beauty.

Mario stomped his designer shoe. "Papa, enough!"

Holy cow, Aldo was Mario's father? The resemblance was nonexistent.

"No." The old man stabbed himself in the chest with his pointed finger. "I say when it is enough." He went back to humming the Super Mario song. Every so often he did a little skip. He winked at me. "I am jumping over turtles."

I decided right then and there that I liked Aldo. At least he had a sense of humor.

"Who is this one?" Aldo asked his son. "Wait, wait. Let me guess. American accent, but the face is very familiar. You are Katerina Makri's granddaughter—yes?"

"Good guess." To say I was impressed was an understatement. "Do you know my grandmother?"

He winked again. "Once upon a time, Katerina and I shared a moment on the beach. Okay, maybe several moments and a lot of sand in uncomfortable places." Beside me, Mario made gagging noises. "Don't listen to this one," Aldo said. "Look at him. He cannot handle anything as natural as lovemaking between a man and a woman. Do you know what his mother found in his room when he was sixteen?"

"Papa!" Mario barked.

Aldo wasn't in a listening mood. "A broom handle. Can you believe it? A broom handle. And it was ..." He made a face. "... Let me just say unnatural things had been done to that broom handle. And the cucumbers that were always disappearing from the garden ..." He shook his head sadly. "My daughter is more of a man."

"I don't have a sister," Mario said.

Aldo shook his hands at the aluminum ceiling a couple of dozen feet above our heads. "Exactly." He looked back at me. "Did Katerina send you here to learn how to make a little art?"

"Something like that."

"You are not the first in your family to come here. Your uncle, I think it was, was here not long ago, but he was working with another group."

I seized on that. "Kostas?"

"No, the other one."

"Rita?" Color me confused.

"No. The eldest one. Michail."

Chapter 8

MY STOMACH FELL DIRECTLY into my shoes. It did not pass GO. It did not collect two hundred bucks. Michail was my father's name. "When was he here?"

"Not long ago."

"Is Italian time like Greek time? Because 'not long ago' could mean anything if we're talking Greek time."

He grinned, and then reeled off a time frame that lined up perfectly with the dates inside the Italian passport I'd found in Dad's safe.

All my blood pulled out of my body and rushed to my face. Everything above the shoulders was hotter than Hades. Below the neck I was giving Elsa from Frozen a run for her chilly money.

This was the second-worst possible news. It meant Dad was neck-deep in a life of crime, decades after he'd abandoned the Makris Family to live quietly in America, raising me and working for a company that didn't exist. Like ogres, Dad was an onion: he had a lot of layers, and a lot of them were stinky. There's no good way to spin a counterfeiting education.

Except there was, wasn't there? Because I was doing it.

But this was different, I told myself. Ultimately I was here for Dad. I couldn't find him if I was stuck in Naples, penniless and without a phone, so I'd sidled up to the dark side, hoping to find a light without a train attached.

"Huh," I said. "How about that." My gaze skated sideways to the phone hanging on the metal wall. Would anyone mind if I made a call? "Which group was he working with?"

"The Neapolitanos," Aldo said.

Even I knew Neapolitano was a name that meant you were from Naples. It was probably as common as ants. Hurl a pizza slice and it would slap a Neapolitano.

"Of course," Aldo went on, "I have to wonder why your family sent you after they sent him."

I went with the truth, no need to dig a deeper hole. "Michail was abducted a few weeks ago. He hasn't been found yet. The Neapolitanos' printing secrets went with him." I showed him my splayed hands. "So my family sent me."

"Kidnapping." Aldo spat on the ground. "Kidnapping is for amateurs. God willing your uncle will come home to your family with

all his pieces.”

“Kidnapping is good,” Mario said. “It twists peoples arms and keeps them honest.”

“This one.” Aldo shook his head in disgust. “Don’t you have some balls to juggle in your mouth?”

“Keep it up, old man, and I will put you in a retirement home.”

Aldo slapped the air. “Pah! You need me. You have no talent for anything. You—” he tapped me on the shoulder “—come with me.”

With thoughts whirling in my head, I followed him over to the laptop.

“All of this,” he told me, “is an addition to a photo manipulation program. Every group has their own base process. This is my design. Years it took me. With this printer this program creates an almost-perfect euro.”

It was difficult to imagine the elderly and rustic Aldo as a programmer. “Almost?”

Aldo plucked a twenty-euro note out of his pocket. “There are three ways to detect a fake. Feel. Look. Tilt. The print on a real euro is slightly raised. The paper is crisp, not ... how you say ... floppy.” He touched a finger to his watery eye. “Hold a genuine euro note to the light and you will see three things: the hologram becomes ... what is the word ... you will see rainbow light. On the back, more rainbows when you hold it to the light. Europe likes rainbows. We are all trying to forget dark times in our history. Now we tilt the money. Do you see the silver stripe? Do you see how the green number dances up and down?”

I did.

“Very difficult to replicate just one of these things,” he continued. “But all of them? Near impossible. The good news is that most of the other idiots are trying to make good-enough money. Theirs are not almost-perfect.”

“What’s your secret?”

He made a face. “The paper, the ink, and the program. None of these things are easy to get. The first two require friends in useful places. The program ... you can have the program for a hundred million euros.”

I almost choked. “That’s a lot of money.”

“Not to somebody like your grandmother.”

No, I was pretty sure it was a lot of money, even to Grandma. “I’m not here to negotiate. I’m here to learn.”

He slapped me on the shoulder, steering me back toward Mario. “And you *have* learned! You have learned the price of making money Aldo Fontana’s way.”

“What about me?” Mario whined.

Aldo didn't waste time looking at his son. "You. Ha!"

The warehouse doors rumbled open. Light filled the space. A red pickup truck that had seen better days and cleaner places slowly backed into the warehouse. When the driver jumped out he left the engine running. No one seemed worried. Maybe they didn't know about carbon monoxide poisoning. You'd think gangsters would be more clued in about death and how to make it happen.

I edged closer to the door where the air was gritty and slightly less gray. At Mario's house the air tasted like sea salt. Here it tasted like I'd been sucking on a tailpipe. The men worked fast, loading up the truck with the stack of boxes that had been sitting in a far corner all this time. The warehouse was so large I hadn't noticed them until now.

"Money?" I asked Aldo.

"Money," he confirmed. "That *mignotta* Mario needs new makeup and maybe a pretty dress."

Ten minutes later, the truck peeled away, bumping over garbage as it fled the scene of the crime—which the entire warehouse technically was. I played third wheel while Mario and his father argued loudly in Italian. Their frantic, vivid hand gestures created a light summer breeze.

They shut up when another vehicle stopped outside. A car door slammed, and a moment later a figure dressed in navy blue, topped with a jaunty peaked cap, stepped into the warehouse. Everything about him screamed, "Cop," especially the badge on his hat. His head swiveled slowly as his gaze gobbled up the scenery, one slow eyeful at a time. It grazed passed me, then doubled back for a second look. And a third.

Jeez, dude. Take a picture.

Words shot out of his mouth like bullets out of a Gatling gun. Aldo and Mario fired their own Italian ammo. I understood nothing except the body language. The cop wanted to know who I was and why I was there. Maybe I was bad *feng shui*.

Aldo explained—or at least he explained something—while the cop continued his visual security sweep of my person. When Aldo was done, the guy spoke in English.

"They call this part of Campania the 'triangle of death'. Do you know why? I will tell you."

What was with people around here? They spent an exorbitant amount of time asking questions they were going to answer for me.

"It is the garbage," he went on. "It is everywhere in this place. Everything you see, everything you touch, is made of shit. The water here? Poison. The air? More poison. That is just the environment. The people here are the head and body of the shit. Aldo and his brat here? Two shits."

“We are shit,” Aldo said, also in English, “but we are rich shit. And we are making you rich shit, too.”

“It is true,” the cop said. “I like money very much.” He nodded to me. “Become shit if you have to, but don’t drink the water. Buy bottled.”

“Get out of here,” Aldo said without a trace of humor in his voice. “You got what you came for.”

“I will have that program,” the cop said.

“Not unless you have a hundred million euros.”

Two rows of stained teeth flashed at the old man, the kind of grin that belonged in a predator’s mouth. “Does the money you give me count?”

Aldo laughed. “Real money.”

The cop made a face. “Too bad.”

“For you,” Aldo said, “but not for me. Sooner or later somebody will pay.”

“A hundred million,” Mario scoffed. “A hundred million is nothing in this business. I know people who would pay a billion.”

Aldo looked around, a curious look on his face. “Where, eh? Where are these people lined up to pay a billion euros for my program? Oh look, there they are.” He nodded to a shadowy corner of the warehouse—which was all of them, basically.

Mario minced toward the door. He paused dramatically, hand landing delicately on one hip. “Everybody wants the program. Do you know how many people have tried to steal it, eh?” Then he returned to his elegantly executed flounce.

Aldo winked at me. “Listen. Five ... four ... three ...”

From outside, Mario whistled.

“That is for you,” his father said. “Best not to keep him waiting, otherwise he might take you shopping.” He faked a shudder. “What a son, what a son. I will be seeing you soon, I think, so no goodbyes, eh?”

Mario bitched about Aldo all the way back to his beachfront mansion.

“He is jealous because I am young and he has one foot in the grave and the other on a hoverboard.”

Aldo wasn’t quite that old, but his toe was definitely creeping up to the cemetery gates. I made noncommittal noises, hoping Mario would interpret them in a way that wouldn’t increase his urge to kill me.

He bitched through lunch—caprese salad, with, he bragged, homemade mozzarella.

“You made it yourself?” I tried not to sound impressed, but I really

liked cheese. Anyone who could make cheese without his or her own farm was my hero.

"I did not say it was made in my home, but it was made in someone's home."

Ha. So much for that.

The salad arrived moments before the main course, a pasta dish bursting with color and flavor.

"Puttanesca," Mario explained. "Whore pasta."

I inspected every forkful suspiciously before shoveling it into my mouth, in case it contained real prostitutes. You just never know about people. Mario struck me as being about as stable as a giraffe on roller-skates.

"It's great."

"Puttanesca is my papa's favorite. That's why I spit in it every time."

That didn't slow me down. Hey, spit or no spit, the pasta was excellent. Besides, the heat must have killed at least some of the bacteria.

Mario balanced his fork on the side of the bowl. He stared at me across the table, his eyes lit up with crazy. "Are you here to steal from me?"

"Steal what?"

"My program."

"I didn't even know you had one until you took me to the warehouse."

He made a sound of disbelief. "Everyone knows about Mario Fontana's counterfeiting application. It is the best in the business."

"Not me," I muttered. "But then I'm not really up-to-date on the organized crime business. There needs to be a magazine."

He nodded like he knew—which he did. "Nothing in this business changes, except when it does. There are two absolutes: money and power. Everything is about the acquisition of money and power, or preventing the loss of either or both. If I lose my program I lose money and I lose power. My money—my fake money—will no longer be the best. If you steal from me—if you are lying about your intentions—I will fucking kill you. *Capishe*? And I don't like to kill with my own hands, so I will be very—how you say—grumpy. Grumpy is not good. Grumpy makes the crow's necks."

"Feet. I'm sure it's crow's feet."

"Why would their feet be on my face?"

"I don't make this stuff up."

"Crow's feet." He laughed, shook his head. "You Americans." His laughter died. "I think my papa is going to ass-fuck me. And I don't like being ass-fucked."

I said nothing.

“Do you think he is going to ass-fuck me?”

I said some more nothing.

That didn’t slow Mario down. He leaned back in his seat. “He is going to ass-fuck me, I know it.”

“He’s your father.”

He wagged a manicured finger at me. “Somebody has never seen *The Empire Strikes Back*.”

For someone who wasn’t a prisoner I was an awful lot like a prisoner. Dinner showed up at my door late—by American standards, anyway—carried by a smirking Baked Potato.

Glaring, I snatched the tray from his hands. Fragrant steam rose from the dishes. “Don’t you have tourists to rob?”

“Even for a woman you talk too much,” he said before locking me in for the night.

“Even for a sexist pig you’re a sexist pig.”

“Pigs are delicious. Are you calling me delicious?”

I rolled my eyes and kicked the door shut.

Expert hands had prepared dinner. The gnocchi was homemade, each potato dumpling a tender bite. The sauce was smooth with a sharp hint of Parmigiano-Reggiano. For dessert they’d served me a generous slab of tiramisu steeped in coffee liqueur. Prison food in a mansion was pretty damn great. Now that the buzz of the day was wearing off, I began to unpack every detail one item at a time while I ate.

Dad had been here in Italy, soaking up the art of counterfeiting.

Local law enforcement was happy to collect government paychecks while dipping into organized crime’s deep, full pockets. All they had to do was look the other way and see nothing, hear nothing, say nothing. Basically they were monkeys.

And Marika and Donk were locked up in a sea cave, at the mercy of the tide.

The bed called to me. *This is the perfect place to assume the fetal position and cry like a little sissy girl*, it said. *Look at these pillows—look at them. They can take a lot of tears. Probably some punching, too.*

It had a point. I wanted to bury myself in its soft, dense bedding and cry myself to sleep. Starting with Dad’s disappearance, I’d been heaved head-first into a life that wasn’t mine. I was nobody—just some kid from Portland, Oregon. What did I know about mobsters and crime? I even returned my library books on time. Now here I was bumping elbows with Italian mobsters, trying to bleed them for

information to appease Greece's intelligence agency. It was that or they might squeeze Grandma. Okay, so in some circles—all the round ones—Grandma was a monster. But she was my grandmother and she was dying. Pressure was something she didn't need more of, so here I was, drowning.

Come on over, the bed whispered like a delicious manwhore. We can have ourselves a time. You know you want me.

"Shut your damn mouth," I told the silent bed.

Marika was right: I needed to get laid. It had been too long. For all I knew there really was a cobweb situation going on. Biology said it wasn't possible, but deep down I worried that maybe the female anatomy was like a piercing, and if you didn't use it once in a while it would close up.

If I made it back to Greece maybe I'd ask Melas on a date. At the very least it would be worth it to watch Hera's makeup-smothered head explode.

I flopped back on the bed, arms outstretched, and let it hold me while I gathered my thoughts into a neat-ish pile. Shuffling through the mental deck, I organized and prioritized. Besides getting back to Greece and Grandma, I had one massive problem. Marika and Donk were caged in that cave. Leaving them there wasn't an option. Mario had me, so he needed to suck it up and be satisfied with one hostage. That's what I was and I knew it. What I didn't know was his endgame, but I figured he'd reveal his hand before long. He was an idiot—he'd screw up and spill his guts.

So. Marika and Donk. Once they were out of the way I could move on to Phase Two, whatever that was. In between, I'd do the crying and rocking I was currently postponing.

I waited a while but God didn't open the window, so I was forced to do it myself. The good news was that no tattletale alarms went howling to their daddy. The bad news was that my room was on the second floor. The gutters were too far away for me to shimmy down. The pool was too far away for me to jump into without me winding up as a cautionary tale, buried with my Darwin Award in hand.

Which left me with the trellis clinging to the wall. It looked sturdy enough to hold something besides the ivy that was currently wending its leafy way up the house. That could work, provided the ivy wasn't poison.

Down I went, backwards. The trellis shuddered and creaked. Ivy slapped me in the face, tickled my arms and legs. I was going to fall and die, wasn't I?

My feet touched the loamy garden earth.

Nope. Not going to die falling off a trellis tonight. I slowly exhaled and took stock of my surroundings. The courtyard was deserted. Back

in Greece, the family compound hummed with low-level activity during the darkest hours. Dogs opened an eye as anyone with a pulse crept around the property. Guards patrolled, invisible mostly. The whole place had eyes and ears. Mario Fontana's grounds were silent and still.

As I inched out of the courtyard and into the fresh, free air I half—no, three quarters—expected a shot to ring out and a bullet to bury itself in something maybe not vital, but definitely painful. My calf, probably. The muscle was softish. Not nearly as toned as it should be but harder than it was two months ago.

But there was no shot and no bullet.

I sneaked down the path that wandered between the palm trees, trying to cobble together some sort of plan. Tools? Didn't have any. Weapons? One gun that possibly worked. Although maybe the Armani Hobo had ditched the firearm because it was a dud ...

Basically all I could rely on once I reached the cave was a smart mouth, a limited amount of hubris, and a wicked case of body odor. My fancy cell had a bathroom with a toilet and bidet. What it did not have was running water from the sink or shower.

Where was the cave? From my vantage point on the rocks, it was gone.

Then it sank in: I couldn't find the cave because the stupid moon had hoisted the tide up over the rock formations I'd seen earlier, covering—and filling—the sea cave.

The tide was high—too high for survivors.

A sob burst out of my throat, Alien-style. Marika and Donk were dead, gone, drowned. I had sworn to keep them safe and now I'd failed them.

Heart achy and breaky, I flopped down on the rocks and waited for the moon to reel in its water.

Six hours—that's how long a high tide takes to recede. Six hours until low tide, then another half dozen until the tide arrived at this same marker on the rocks.

I didn't have six hours.

I didn't need it.

After a couple of the longest hours of my life, the ocean scooted low enough for me to wade into the cave. In I went, heart in my throat, stomach contents crouching at the bottom of my esophagus.

The cage was empty.

There was no sign of Marika and Donk. Somehow they'd escaped—I hoped. I wandered back out to the beach, hands on hips, and

scanned the rocky beach for life signs.

There was some life; starfish, crabs, wriggling fish trapped in the water-filled pools. But no Greeks.

Ooooh ... and look: a couple of men bolting down the path from Mario's mansion. If you could call Baked Potato and Beaver men. They were more of an Italian comedy duo. Cheech and Chong without the weed or the Big Green Van.

They were yelling in Italian.

I raised my hands in the "Who, me?" position. "Can't a guest take a swim?" I asked.

"You were not swimming, you were escaping. We know escaping when we see it," Beaver said, mustering all his criminal know-how.

"If I'm escaping, then how come I'm not escaping?"

They stopped to scratch their heads. "Because we stopped you?" Baked Potato said.

"Because I wasn't escaping," I said slowly, indulgently.

They did some equally slow math. Baked Potato yelped and went hauling ass into the cave. He emerged a moment later, rubbing his face with both hands.

"You let them go."

"They were gone before I got here."

"Mario is going to kill me."

I thought Mario was more likely to challenge him to a dance-off.

He stooped to pick up something wedged between the rocks. White plastic, about five inches long. Baked Potato looked up and down the beach. "Mario is going to kill me twice. Fucking tourists dropping their garbage. This is a private beach!"

"Do you know what that is?" I asked him.

"Garbage."

"Not married are you?"

He scoffed. "Show me a man who wants to be shackled to a woman and I will show you an idiot."

"Have you ever touched a woman?"

Beaver laughed.

Baked Potato made a face. "I kiss my mama goodnight every night."

"I want to kiss your mama every night," Beaver said. Baked Potato shoved him onto the rocks. A playful, vaguely homoerotic man-tussle ensued, and in the process the white plastic tumbled to the rocks. I scratched my leg, bobbed down to pick it up and stuffed it into my pocket. Unlike the two bozos, I recognized the stick and the significance of the pink cross stretched across its oval window.

Marika's pregnancy test.

It was positive.

Chapter 9

BEAVER AND BAKED POTATO—I still didn't know their real names—carted me back to my fancy prison cell, but I didn't mind too much. Marika and Donk had escaped the sea cave before the tide had a chance to gobble them up. Possibly it was some kind of Italian folk magic.

Or not.

My money was on Marika chewing through the bars. When she was hungry she wasn't exactly picky. Possibly a third-party intervention; I hadn't forgotten the Armani Hobo.

Everyone mixed up in this crime soup—Greeks, Italians, law enforcement, and civilians—needed team shirts so I'd know who was who and whether they were using their powers for good or evil. Bright, unmistakable colors.

If the homeless guy with the thimble-sized bladder was responsible for the timely jailbreak, I was grateful ... and baffled. What the heck was his motivation? Did he travel Italy on foot, peeing on all available surfaces and doing good deeds? Was dumping a gun in a garbage can for a stranger technically a good deed?

I didn't have any answers.

What I did have was an itchy back.

Using the doorframe to scratch my itch, I closed my eyes in the dark room and sent out silent thanks to any eavesdropping deity for Marika and Donk's getaway. With luck they were now headed home, leaving Italy, and me, in their dust.

If they were safe I could deal with whatever came next.

When I woke up it was still the dead of night, and the world was completely black. The power must be out, I figured.

Oof! Something hit me in the face. A wall by the feel of it. The light, when my fingers found it, didn't work. Power outage, for sure. Because Italy didn't suck quite hard enough *with* electricity.

Channeling my inner mime, I felt my way around the boxy room to the bathroom. I crawled across the floor until my chin collided with cool porcelain. For once I was glad I was in Italy where toilets were for sitting, instead of Greece where your average toilet was built for

squatting like a dog.

This was crazy. When I went to the beach, the moon had been a generous sliver and the sky had been glassy. The clouds must have rolled in thick and fast to hide the moon this well. I waved my hand in front of my face. Nothing.

Oh God. This was the zombie apocalypse, wasn't it? I listened for sounds of moaning and shambling, but the night was quiet. Stealth zombies then. Hey, it could happen. Stealth zombies weren't any less ludicrous than regular zombies. If your imagination is going to work it may as well work overtime, otherwise why bother?

Scratching one-handed, I felt my way around to the door. Mosquitos must have made a meal out of me when I snuck out. My skin wasn't used to Italian mosquitos. My body was soft and American, used to summer nights under an air conditioner's low hum.

One hand clawing at my skin, I jiggled the door handle with the other.

"Hey," I called out. "Is the power out? Is it zombies?"

Footsteps approached the door. "What are you talking about? Zombies? What zombies?"

Beaver. Clearly he wasn't a fan of zombie flicks. That or the Italians used some other word to describe the shambling undead.

There was a click as he unlocked the door. I felt air rush past me, then a long stretch of time where nothing happened.

"Hello?"

"*Che cazzo*," he whispered.

"No speakee Italian," I said.

"What happened to your face?"

"My face?" My hands quit scratching. I reached up and touched a face that wasn't mine. I mean, it was on my shoulders but it felt like someone had swapped my usual skull for a watermelon. "Argh! What's going on? Somebody tell me!"

Footsteps thundered down the hall toward us. Two sets, at least. They came skidding to a halt a few feet away. Two voices gasped.

"It's horrible," Mario said melodramatically. I pictured him pressing the back of his hand to his forehead, swoon imminent. "I cannot take it. Make it stop."

"What is it?" I asked. "Is it Italian Ebola?"

Nothing. Well, not quite nothing. There was the soft snorting sound of someone trying to suppress laughter.

"Oh jeez," I said slowly. "The power isn't out, is it?"

"No," said Beaver.

"And it's not pitch dark?" My voice bore a hopeful note, painted on a backdrop of doom.

"It's nine o'clock ..."

“At night?”

“... in the morning.”

“And my face?”

“Hideous,” Mario said. “All puffed up like a loaf of bread. The biggest loaf of bread I have ever seen. And I am a man who has seen a lot of bread. My grandmother used to make these wonderful round loaves bigger than my head, but not bigger than your head.”

Baked Potato didn’t say a word. I knew he was the third guy because my other senses were all suddenly razor sharp and his eau de loser was about to knock me out. I swung my fist in his direction ... and hit a wall.

Big, ugly, damp laughter burst out. Three grown men howling while I hopped around, nursing my fist and scratching like I’d fallen in a patch of poison ivy.

Screw those guys.

Figuratively.

With a rusty chainsaw.

“Screw you guys,” I said, leaving out the part about the chainsaw. They were still my captors and I wasn’t totally stupid. My stupidity was a half-assed infliction that came and went.

“We should put this on YouTube,” Baked Potato said. “I bet we get a million hits.”

“No. No YouTube,” I said. “I’ll sue you.”

“For what? Nobody will know it’s you.”

“I’ll know it’s me,” I wailed. This couldn’t be happening. What was Europe going to throw at me next? Would they force me to grow a crop of armpit hair and fill my iPhone with Eurovision songs?

A pack of stupid hens, the Italians continued to cackle. I hated them. I’d shoot them all if I had a gun.

Wait—I did have a gun. A gun nobody knew I had. Apparently not even me, at times. Too bad I couldn’t see them to shoot them.

“What happened?” I demanded, hopping around and scratching frantically. “Is this Italian voodoo? It’s not an allergy—I haven’t got allergies!”

The laughing stopped long enough for Mario to say, “Did you climb out the window?” in a mocking, singsong voice.

“Maybe.” I turned in the direction of his voice. Eyeing him suspiciously wasn’t possible right now. “Why?”

“Somebody had a little cuddle-cuddle with Papa’s sweet plants, didn’t they?”

“Maybe. Wait—was that a rhetorical question? Because it sounded rhetorical.”

“I don’t know what that means, but the answer is yes, you cuddled with my plants. They are lovely, yes? They make pretty patterns on

people who try to climb in or out my windows. But even I have not seen a reaction like this before.” He wheezed with laughter again.

“It’s very funny!” Beaver said. “Could you hop around some more, do a little dance? Look, an American monkey.”

The men took to jabbering in Italian, and it sounded to me like more than one of them was holding up his phone. So I did the mature thing: I ran back into my room and slammed the door behind me. Locking it from this side was out of the question, so I slid downward and blocked the door with my body. If I could see the furniture I’d drag it over. But I couldn’t, so I was forced to work with what I had. A hundred and twenty or so pounds of American-Greek—possibly more with this massive, bloated head on my shoulders.

“Check the cave,” Mario barked on the other side of the door.

There was silence from the peanut gallery. Oh-ho—so neither of the two bozos had delivered the bad news that Mario was down two hostages.

A small thrill rippled through me. Dissent amongst the bad guys had the potential to foster opportunity. Opportunity was nice. I liked opportunity.

I also liked eyesight, but right now I had none. And what was that smell? Was it me? Jeez, I really hoped it wasn’t me.

I raised my arm and gagged as the BO slapped me.

Yup, it was me. Jeez ...

Baked Potato muttered something in Italian. Mario asked a question, sheer disbelief coating his words. Both flunkies chased his question with a steady torrent of words, none of which meant a thing to me, proving that arguments are less entertaining when you can’t understand the language.

Back to the door, I waited for the dust to settle and hoped no bullets would show up. The door seemed solid enough, but even the toughest wood gets wobbly in the cellulose when someone fires a gun in its direction.

Mario hiked his voice to scream level. Beneath the ear-bleeding pitch Baked Potato and Beaver murmured platitudes. It wasn’t a stretch to imagine them bowing and scraping as they escaped down the corridor, backwards.

Finally it was just Mario Fontana and me.

“Poison ivy?” I called out.

“Yes,” Mario said. “I had a friend smuggle the seeds into Italy for me. They are a special breed. Extra strong. Do you like?”

“Charming. Do you have any Benadryl or calamine lotion?”

“Whatever that is I don’t have it. And if I do have it, I don’t have it. Think of this as a lesson and me as your teacher. If you had stayed in your room where you belong, this would not have happened.”

“How about some coffee?”

There was a pause.

“Please?” I said, sounding pitiful.

“Okay, you can have coffee. I am not that cruel.”

Coffee came on a tray, creamy, sugary, and hot. Some of it even made it into my mouth. My tongue wasn't swollen up, so that was something. The coffee was accompanied by something soft and squishy that turned out to be a napkin.

“Psst! To the right,” a voice said in whispered Greek. It was low, male, and definitely not Donk. This voice had balls in it, and it was coming from the direction of the window—at least I thought so.

“Right?”

“On the tray.”

My fingers danced awkwardly across the lacquered surface, where they discovered something else soft and squishy. Call me suspicious but I wasn't about to stick it in my mouth. One mouthful of napkin had made me jumpy.

“It's food,” the voice outside the window said. “Eat.”

“Because I'll need my strength?” I said hopefully.

“No, because it has medicine that will fix your problem.”

“Which problem? Because I've got a few right now.”

“The poison ivy problem.”

“The poison ivy outside the window, where you are right now?”

“Don't worry about me. Get that medicine into you.”

“How do I know it's not poison or some kind of drugs?”

His voice took on a strained quality. “Because if it was poison or drugs I would have let you discover the sweet roll on your own.”

I perked up. “A sweet roll?”

“A sweet roll.”

A sweet roll didn't sound like the answer to any of my problems, but it did sound delicious. I grabbed it and began gnawing, the part of my DNA that had once been an animal seizing control of my mouth. It was warm, mouthwatering, fresh. When it had vanished I considered licking the tray. Too bad I had company, even if I couldn't see him.

“Who are you and what are you doing outside the window?”

“Keep your voice down,” he said.

Speaking of voices, his was closer now. “Are you inside my room?”

“Didn't want anyone to notice me clinging to the wall.”

“Are you the Armani Hobo?”

There was a pause. Then: “You noticed it was Armani?”

“Your coat is old and shabby but it's a great cut. So you are the

Armani Hobo?"

"I don't want that to be my superhero name," he said. Men—they all wanted to be superheroes. "Can't you call me something else?"

"What's your name? I'll call you that."

"Not yet," he said.

"Armani Hobo."

I felt his flinch from across the room. "I guess that will do for now."

"Where are Marika and Donk?"

"Safe."

"Define safe."

"They are on their way back to Greece as we speak—legal and above-board."

"You have that kind of power?" I said, reverence creeping into my voice.

"I know people."

"What people?"

"Your people. Do you always ask this many questions?"

"If people would just tell me things I wouldn't have to."

"You should know Mario Fontana sent a ransom demand to your family."

"Ransom! How much?"

"A hundred and one million."

A light bulb came on in my head. "A hundred million. That's how much Aldo wanted from Grandma to buy his counterfeiting program."

He made a non-committal sound.

"So that makes me worth ... a million dollars then?"

"Moving along," he said quickly. "Aldo offered you the program? Does Mario know?"

I set aside my indignity. For now, anyway. "He was close by. Why?"

"Big father-son feud between those two." I opened my mouth but he cut me off. "Don't ask me why, I don't know. But Aldo would be happy to put an end to Mario's business while pocketing some getaway money for himself. And who can blame him? Aldo Fontana is a criminal, but Mario? He's a stupid criminal."

"He doesn't seem too stupid if he's holding me for ransom."

"He's stupid for doing it while Baboulas is in the hospital. Nobody in the Family will make a move without her approval—not even to save you."

"They don't like me," I said, trying not to blubber. After all we'd been through together they wouldn't pull my bacon out of the fire and slap it back into the frying pan.

"Of course they like you. Who wouldn't?" There was a smile in his

voice. "But if they do the wrong thing and Baboulas recovers? They know what she is capable of."

"Okay." My heart lay heavy in my chest, a deflated bicycle tire of a thing. "So what now?"

"What has to happen. You shoot Mario."

Chapter 10

“I CAN’T SHOOT MARIO!” I squeaked.

“Do you want to go back to Greece?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have to kill Mario.”

“But I don’t want to kill Mario. I don’t want to kill anyone. Except Hera—I really want to kill her.”

“The NIS woman?”

My marshmallow head nodded.

“Take a number. Everybody wants to kill her. I hear even her own sister would not piss on her if she were on fire.”

That sounded true. There didn’t seem to be any love lost—or any love—between Irini and Hera. I understood it; Hera was a skanky bitch-beast.

“If anyone has to shoot anyone, why can’t *you* shoot Mario?”

“I don’t have a gun.”

I looked at him—at least I tried. There was light now, thin and blurry between the slits. “I have a gun.”

“I know. It was my gun.”

“You can have it back.”

Silence.

“Hello? Anyone there? Armani Hobo?”

I pushed the tray aside, crawled toward the bed, banged my face on the bedpost. I was like an old blind dog, bumbling around, mistaking sticks for bones.

A voice filtered through the door. “Who are you talking to?”

Baked Potato was back.

“Myself,” I fired back, hoping he’d buy the lie. Well, technically not a lie if the Armani Hobo had left the building.

“Crazy Greek,” he muttered.

“Only half.”

“Oh, excuse me. Crazy Greek, stupid American.”

The itching was slowly abating. So was the swelling. My field of vision had increased to an itty bitsy narrow slit. The world wasn’t quite as black now. Whatever had been in the sweet roll, it was working fast.

“Yes, stupid Americans.” I pulled a page from Marika’s notebook. “Remind me again ... who won World War II?”

The blow was low and hard, but Italy is one of those places it’s

difficult to criticize; they're responsible for pizza, pasta, and gelato, for crying out loud.

On the other side of the door there was a *snick* as Baked Potato unlocked the door. Seconds later, he burst through. I had to tilt my head up and down to get the whole picture. Puffed up chest. Jutting chin. Pointy finger.

"Say it again, to my face this time, eh?"

I played innocent. "Say what?"

He lunged. I felt the whoosh of displaced air and stepped aside as he slid past. Baked Potato landed with a thud that made me wince.

"Stupid she-dog," he said, peeling himself up off the marble tile. "You think you can win against me?"

I swung my leg around, knocking him off his feet. It was a fall that took a long time. It began with arm flailing and wide-eyes. His mouth moved into the 'oh shit' position. Then he crash-landed on the ground with a mighty *crack*, using his wide butt as a landing pad. For the record, marble tile beats human buttocks.

"You broke my ass," he said, tears flooding his eyes. He wiped them away with the back of his hand, then he grabbed me by the neck and shook. "I should have killed you in that alley. Or when you asked to borrow my phone."

"It wasn't your phone," I said. The words came out breathy. Having your windpipe crushed will do that. "You stole it."

"After you steal something it becomes yours. That's how it works."

"That's not how the police see it." My fist swung up, crashing into the side of his face. He made an *oof* sound but his hands didn't relax.

No way in hell was I going to die under this bloated tuber. This time, instead of a fist I used a pointy finger, glad that it came complete with ragged hangnails and rough cuticles. I jammed it into his eye.

Baked Potato squealed and pulled away. As he did, I punched him in the junk. It wasn't hard but it was enough to send him into an immediate fetal position.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs. Beaver poked his head around the corner. His eyes widened, big as saucers, when he drank in the sight of his gagging buddy.

"You want some of this?" My breath came in short huffs. Turns out beating up guys is hard work. In the movies they make it look so easy. "I've got more where that came from." Not really, but they didn't know that.

Beaver shook his head and ducked back around the corner. He'd be back. Probably with Mario and the rest of his security—if he had more security. For a loaded guy in the organized crime business he seemed light on manpower.

I flopped back on the tile, panting. Getting up seemed like the thing to do next. Get away while the getting away was good—and possible. I leveraged myself up off floor and limped away, rubbing my tender throat.

Whatever the Armani Hobo had given me it had worked fast. My vision was nearly back to normal and the itching had stopped. Whoever he was, I was grateful for his help. Not the part about killing Mario, but definitely the other part. If we ever crossed paths again I'd thank him ... after a lot of yelling.

I locked the door from the outside. I had more problems than Jay Z, but Baked Potato wouldn't be one of them. Temporarily, anyway.

Finding the way out wasn't a hassle for long. Super Mario's castle was skimpy on staff and other potential tattletales, and from the looks of things all doors lead to the courtyard. I took the first one I encountered and burst out into the sunlight, instantly blinded by unfiltered rays.

Sunglasses? Forget it. Jamming my Hay-Beans onto this misshapen, oversized head wasn't happening. I kept my eyes on the ground and trotted toward the path I knew lead to the beach. Despite the Armani Hobo's orders I had no plans to kill anyone. Taking orders from complete strangers struck me as foolish, sweet roll spiked with antihistamines or not, especially when those instructions involved murder. So my plan involved getting to the beach and winging it from there. Maybe one of the distant neighbors had a phone I could use.

Then I realized I wasn't alone in the courtyard. Mario's stepsons were lounging beside the pool in chaise lounges. They'd dipped themselves in grease for another hot Italian late-summer baking session.

Sneaking past wasn't doable. They'd already spotted me and lowered their sunglasses accordingly. On any other day I might be flattered. Today ... nope. Today I was the elephant woman. My skin was violet. I looked like the side effects pharmaceutical commercials warned people about and the Ringling Bros recruited in the old days.

Okay, and I had blood in places there shouldn't be blood. The outside, mostly.

"What are you looking at? You live with a criminal and you've never seen anyone bleeding?"

"What happened to you?" the one in the white speedos wanted to know. Yikes, that thing was see-through. Didn't they know about lining in Italy?

"Poison ivy. Life pro tip: See the vine over there?" I hooked a thumb at the exterior wall. "Don't touch it."

"And the blood?"

"Fight," I said.

“Who did you fight?”

“Some guy who looks like a baked potato.”

They gave me a thumbs up then went back to their sun worshipping. Guess they didn’t like Baked Potato any more than I did.

“Hey,” I called out. “Where’s Mario?”

White Speedo lowered his mirrored sunglasses. “At the beach with Mama.”

I rolled my eyes. That was just great. The beach was my exit strategy. Making a getaway in front of my captor didn’t seem like a solid or covert escape plan. I might have to shoot a man in front of his wife. I wasn’t sure I could do it without her present; with an audience, definitely not.

Wing it—that’s all I could do. My stomach churned. Europe was hell on my nerves.

Dealing with Mario ... there had to be another way. I’d have to be resourceful and find it. Shooting the guy because he made money (literally) struck me as serious overkill. To me, firing a gun at someone was a last resort, a life or death thing. Me or them. Bodily injury would never be casual. Not for me. And that’s what this would be if I went through with it. Which I wouldn’t.

I was still Kat Makris, kid from Portland. Bill collector. Daughter. Friend. All-around mostly decent human being.

What if I shot Mario and he *died*?

I gnawed on the problem all the way to the beach, kicking pebbles in my espadrilles. Was the Armani Hobo watching, waiting to see if I had the stones to finish off Mario? What would he do if I didn’t pull the trigger?

Sure enough, Mario was on the beach, his arm held out in a stiff triangle so that the senior citizen at his side had something to grip. He didn’t look comfortable being this close to boobs. Granted, they weren’t that close. His wife was five-foot-nothing and her sweet chariots were swinging low. Not that I could talk. Every time I saw Grandma I saw my future, and it came with a pair of low riders. Mrs. Mario could see Grandma’s generation from where she was standing in the sixty zone. She must have had her sons on the brink of forty. Taking Mario’s previous wife into consideration, maybe living with the counterfeiter was hard living, each year the equivalent of working the land for ten during the dust bowl days. For all I knew she was really my side of forty.

I pulled back my shoulders, hoping it would be more than an inch of prevention.

“Hey, look who it is,” Mario called out, big grin sprawling across his handsome face. The smile didn’t reach his eyes. They were frosty steel. “Your head still makes me laugh. And your skin ... you look like

a strawberry. How is the itching?"

His wife nailed him in the face with an epic stink-eye. If looks could kill, he'd be battered on the rocks, the sea slowly sloughing the flesh off his bones. Yikes. Better stay on her good side. If she wanted him dead I might actually consider pulling the trigger just to avoid her wrath.

"Who is this? One of your *putas*?"

"Jeez," I said. "Do I look like a prostitute?"

Or a man.

She ignored me. "Answer the question, Mario."

He patted her on the arm. "She is our guest, my beloved."

Guest, my milky white butt. Mrs. Mario wasn't convinced either. Smart woman.

"If she is our guest then why have I not met her?"

Panic filled his eyes. "Uh ..."

Speaking of eyes, I rolled mine. I couldn't believe I was actually going to do this. "Because I just arrived," I said. "You'll have to forgive my appearance. Travel is hell these days."

Mrs. Mario sniffed the air, made a disgusted face. "How did you travel—donkey?"

The past couple of days caught up with me in one fell swoop, dumping ice water on my head. Abducted and dumped in yet another foreign country, with no money, no phone, and two dependents. Threatened, yelled at, and held hostage. Then there was the poison ivy episode. And now this sagging heap of kohl eyeliner and gaudy jewelry wanted to judge me for how I looked?

Enough. More than enough. That's how much I'd had of Italy and its alleged charms.

I reached down, whipped out the Armani Hobo's gun, pointed it at the bitchy old bat, and waited for her to crumple or run.

Whatever effect I expected it to have, it totally didn't.

She scoffed. "Come on, do you think this is the first time someone has pulled a gun on me? My first husband used to hold a gun to my head while I juggled his balls in my mouth."

Mario and I stared at her in horror.

"Go on, shoot me," she went on. "It's okay. Death is cheaper than divorce. When I die, Mario gets nothing. If we divorce he gets half."

Shock buttered his face. "What do you mean I get nothing?"

"Okay, you get something." She grinned. Gray teeth stuck up like little tombstones. Someone really loved the red vino and cigarettes. "An unmarked grave at the bottom of the sea. My family will make sure you disappear."

"Seems fair," I said.

"I think so, too. He's a terrible husband. And I would know—I

have had a few.”

“How many exactly?” I asked.

“Counting Mario? Seven. Wedding cake is my favorite dessert.”

Mario got all huffy. Poor widdle baby didn’t like the joke being on him.

“Are you going to shoot somebody,” he said to me, “or are you going to just stand there?”

“I’m thinking.” I chewed on my lip. “I’m supposed to kill you, but I’m not really a fan of shooting people for fun. So I’m trying to think of a good reason to do it.”

“I can give you many excellent reasons to shoot him,” his wife said.

“Shut up, my little cupcake, Mario said. “So are you an assassin or a thief?”

“Not even close. I’m just a bill collector.”

Mrs. Mario had something to say about that. “In Italy bill collectors double as assassins. That way we only have to pay one salary.”

“That makes good business sense,” I said. “But my job just involves calling people on the phone and asking them to pay their bills—or part of their bills.” I thought about the way I did it, compared to most of my coworkers. “Politely.”

The married couple gawked at me, aghast. Mrs. Mario said, “You ask them on the phone? Politely? You say ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ and they can hang up or lie?”

“Pretty much.”

They looked at each other and laughed like I was the best joke ever.

“Sometimes they pay up,” I said in my defense. At least I could sleep at night—or I used to. These days my nights were restless and dream-filled.

A voice wafted over the rocks. “Katerina? Just shoot him, okay?”

Mario whipped around. “Who is there?”

Shock squeezed the trigger for me. The gun went *BANG*. Mario yelped, then he fell to the ground, cradling his foot. “You shot off my toe!” he screamed. “Do you know what that will do to my balance?”

“She could shoot off the other one,” his wife said helpfully. “Then they will match.”

“It was an accident,” I wailed. “I was startled.”

The Armani Hobo leaped up onto the rocks. He was still in his long coat, looking like he’d spent the last year convening with the garbage that collects under an overpass. “Finish him,” he said in Greek.

Gun still in hand, I grabbed my head, trying to make sense of all the craziness. “Could we all just use one language? You’re all confusing me. I can’t think, and I really need to think.”

“What is there to think about?” Armani Hobo wanted to know. At least he wanted to know it in English now. “Just shoot him. Squeeze the little trigger until it goes BANG. You did it once, you can do it again.”

“Can’t I just maybe do his foot again?”

“No!” Mario howled. “It hurts.”

“Come on, Katerina. Kill him. He’s not even shit. He is shit’s shit. Maybe even shit’s shit’s shit. He’s the grandshit of shit.”

“You have toilet training issues, don’t you?” I commented.

The Armani Hobo shrugged. “My mother wasn’t really committed to parenting.” He nodded to Mario, who was rocking back and forth, still hugging the bloody appendage. His wife was watching over him, her expression clearly saying she wished she’d married a man instead of this child. “Killing him would make a lot of people happy. Happy people are grateful people, and in this business grateful people are good people to know.”

“I’d be grateful,” Mrs. Mario said. “My sons would be grateful. Of course I would have to find another husband ...” She batted her eyelashes at the ragamuffin on the rocks.

The Armani Hobo cut her off. “I have a wife.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Really?”

“Ten happy years.”

“Shoot him anyway,” the wife said.

“You will have to do it sooner or later,” the Armani Hobo said to me. “Look at your heritage, where you are going, what you are doing. You think you can step into Baboulas’s shoes after she’s gone without being able to shoot one worthless man?”

“That’s the thing—he’s not worthless to everyone. What about his father?”

The Armani Hobo laughed. “Aldo? Who do you think gave these orders?”

Mario looked stricken. “Papa?”

“Funny story ...” In a few short leaps the Armani Hobo left the rocks and landed beside me. He poked at Mario with his scuffed boot. “Aldo Fontana is your father in name, but you are not his blood. He didn’t tell you?”

“It’s not true!”

“It’s true. Consider this him telling you that you are no longer welcome in his family.”

“Jeez,” I said. “That’s cold.”

“That’s the business,” the Armani Hobo said. He made a swishing motion with his hands. “Can we hurry this up?”

I looked down at my feet. After a brief interlude as visually challenged, I appreciated my eyesight more than ever. “I don’t want to

wear Grandma's shoes. Her feet are smaller than mine and we don't share the same taste."

"So who will take over the family business when she dies?"

"Aunt Rita? My uncle in Germany. Dad. Xander. Takis." The last one was a terrifying thought. Takis was more of a doer, less of a thinker. He made a good fist. "Anybody except me."

"Xander?" He snorted. "I could tell you a story or two about Xander."

I turned to face him. "How exactly are you connected to my family?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Mario took a brief break from wailing. "He's crazy like you. He has to be related."

"Shut up," we said in unison.

Mario held up his hands. "Okay. Okay."

I waved the gun at the injured Italian. "Now that I think about it, that's actually a pretty good guess. Are we related, Armani Hobo?"

Mrs. Mario raised two overly plucked brows.

"That's not my real name," the aforementioned hobo said.

"It fits," she said, inspecting his outerwear. "That used to be a very nice coat."

"You could tell us your real name, then we could call you that," I said.

"He looks like a Rocco to me," Mrs. Mario said. "Dirty Rocco."

He did look dirty but he didn't look like a Rocco, on account of how Rocco was an Italian name and this guy was definitely Greek. Dirty Not-Rocco looked at the gun in my hand. "You can be a good person or you can be a dead person," he said. "And you have about ten seconds to choose."

Alarmed, I glanced around for signs of impending death. We were on the beach. Options were limited unless this was a *Jaws* situation. "Why? What's happening in ten seconds?"

On the ground, Mario laughed. "A little precaution I like to take."

His wife rolled her eyes. "Listen to him bragging. This idiot takes no precautions. I take precautions. My house. My security. My precautions."

"What precautions?" I asked, starting to feel desperate.

"You should have just killed him," she said, "leaving behind only one witness who would happily lie while you make your getaway. I enjoy playing the grieving widow."

"Just how many times have you played it?" I asked.

She shrugged. "All of them."

Yowza! I grabbed the man formerly known as the Armani Hobo by the arm. "Let's get out of here."

"And go where? It's too late now," he said.

Sirens closed in on the property fast.

“Police?” I asked

“Worse,” Mrs. Fontana said. “Dirty police. They work wherever there is the biggest paycheck. They come if I don’t press a code on my phone every hour.”

I was done with Italy. These people were officially too crazy and too paranoid for me—and that was saying something given the crooked shape of my family tree.

“Perfect,” I said, “because I didn’t do anything. My conscience is clean.”

“What about me?” Mario blubbered. “You shot me.”

“Yeah—by accident!”

“You’re still holding the gun.”

I looked from the gun in my hand to the ocean grasping at the shore with its foamy hands. I pitched the gun into the water. “What gun?”

Beside me, the hobo groaned. “That was my only gun.”

“Relax,” I said, “according to Marika you can always buy a gun from a shady guy under a bridge.”

“I was that guy,” he said.

“And you don’t have more guns?”

“I sold them.”

“What was the next part of your plan?”

He scratched his head. Lice, probably. “Wait for the helicopter.”

“What helicopter?”

Up at the house, tires came to an apathetic stop. Maybe Mario’s wife was paying them, but she wasn’t paying them enough to care more quickly. The sirens quit. Given the distance between here and the house, we had a minute or more, depending on how long it took them to search the premises for trouble.

Now that the sirens were silent I heard the telltale buzz of an incoming helicopter. Then I saw the blowfly in the sky. The black helicopter was closing in fast.

“Please tell me that’s for us,” I said.

No answer. The Armani Hobo was busy. Either he was signaling to the helicopter or he was answering my question in the medium of interpretive dance.

The helicopter dipped lower. The pilot resembled a manly, broad-shouldered Princess Leia. It hovered overhead. A cable with a harness attached tumbled out. Neither of the Fontanas looked happy or impressed. Probably they had their own rescue copters. Me, I was a girl from Oregon. I grew up in the suburbs, where choppers never performed last-minute rescues to yank me out of trouble. Yeah, I was impressed.

“Who are you?” I shouted at the hobo.

He grabbed the harness and held it out to me. “Get in, Katerina Makri.”

“Makris with an S. What about you?”

He shot a look up at the house. There was no sign of the cops but there would be any second now. “Get up there now. You’re your family’s future, whether you want to be or not,” he yelled over the rotors’ *whomp-whomp-whomp*.

I stood my ground. “I don’t know who you are, but you saved me. Now I’m returning the favor.”

“You’re stubborn.”

“Mostly I just like to know stuff. I don’t think that’s unreasonable.”

He fastened the harness around himself, and then he threw me over his shoulder.

“You remind me of my mother,” he yelled.

COPS POURED down the path to the beach. Cops on the rocks. Heh. The high of the narrow escape was making me woozy. Now that we were safely on the helicopter, the Armani Hobo plopped me down on the metal floor and unhooked his harness.

“Xander,” he shouted. “Great timing.”

Xander? Xander was here?

I shoved the hobo out of the way and pushed to the front of the helicopter. The pilot’s head turned. Manly Princess Leia was Xander.

For a moment he gawked at me.

Ung. The poison ivy. Mario’s darlings had turned me into a beast.

Then Xander smiled like he was genuinely glad to see my face, misshapen or not.

This was one of those times where it wasn’t easy to be me. I was filled with the burning desire to grab his massive shoulders and kiss him until we couldn’t breathe. On other hand I wanted to plant my foot in the middle of his broad chest and kick him out of the helicopter. Where was he two days ago when we needed rescuing?

When I asked him that exact question, he winked at me, then he focused on the Armani Hobo behind me. The hobo and Xander did some elaborate hand-slapping thing that guys do.

“Xander, my man. Good work.”

Xander, predictably, said nothing. He never did. Whether he couldn’t or wouldn’t, I didn’t know, although I had my suspicions that it was the latter. For whatever reason, Xander refused to talk—to me, anyway.

“Are Marika and Donk okay?” I asked.

Xander nodded.

“What now?” I asked them.

The Armani Hobo shrugged out of his long coat, dropped it onto one of the seats. He sat down beside it, buckled himself in and closed his eyes.

“Now we rest.”

One of us rested. Mostly I sat there fighting the urge to bite my nails.

The Armani Hobo opened one eye. “Are you staring at me?”

“Yes.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Have you come to any conclusions?”

“Nope.”

He chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“You. Why didn’t you shoot Mario?”

“Why didn’t you?”

“You had the gun.”

“Yeah—that you gave me.”

“You chose to pick it up. Why would you pick up a gun unless you intend to use it?”

“So someone else wouldn’t. What if a child had picked it up?”

“You know any kids who poke through the garbage?”

Not off the top of my head, but Marika and Takis’ kids were definitely contenders. Thinking about them with a loaded gun made me shudder.

“Did Aldo really want his son killed?”

“Not his son.”

“He raised Mario, therefore that’s his kid. Are you telling me Aldo Fontana really paid you to have me kill Mario?”

“Do you always ask this many questions?”

“This is a slow day.”

He closed his eyes. “My Virgin Mary.”

“Wow, you don’t smell so good,” Aldo said to me when he jumped aboard Grandma’s plane. Xander had landed in an undisclosed, to me, location. Asking was an exercise in futility, so I just held my tongue. We’d moved from the helicopter to a plane I immediately recognized as Grandma’s. Xander didn’t waste time. He made a beeline for the front of the aircraft and fired up the engines. The Armani Hobo and I buckled up and waited for takeoff.

And that’s when a car came skidding to a stop outside the plane and Aldo had bolted out and up the steps. He’d flopped down beside me, buckled his seatbelt, and now he was looking at me with a wrinkled nose.

“I’ve been wearing these clothes for three days. You don’t exactly smell fresh either. What is that—ink?”

“I had to make some more money before I left. Papa has got to live somehow.” He hefted a large duffel bag onto his lap.

I eyed the luggage. “Fake?”

“Real and freshly laundered.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Italian food finally got old.” He grinned. “Or maybe it was me who got old, eh?”

That was more like it. Nobody got sick of Italian food.

An hour later, we landed on Grandma’s private airstrip on the outskirts of Volos. The four of us piled into the gleaming black SUV parked at the edge of the field. I aimed for the shotgun position but somehow—sorcery, I suspected—wound up in the backseat again. Xander had issues with me sitting in the front. It had all started with his appalling taste in music and my inability to keep from changing the station. Rembetika—Greek folk music—is the malformed offspring of horny cats and silverware scraping across a greasy plate. Play it to POWs, you’d be violating the Geneva Conventions. Xander flicked on the sound system. A guy with a toothache began warbling about how the Turks had stolen his goat but left his mother.

The Armani Hobo jumped into the front seat. His identity was still a mystery to me, despite my attempts to lure him into a game of Twenty Questions. It could wait. My eyelids were suddenly heavier than physics said they should be. The hot Greek sun crept through the SUV’s glass, patted me on the head, and told me a tiny nap wouldn’t hurt anyone.

I woke up sometime later, face plastered to my arm with a streak of drool. It was just me and Xander in the car. We were parked outside the Volos hospital.

“Where did they go?”

Xander pointed to the hospital.

Fear tackled me. “How is Grandma?”

He gave me a thumbs up. My shoulders slumped with relief.

“Can we go see her?”

He jumped out to open my door. I tried taming my hair but I was a hopeless situation. Sand and grime had turned my yellow dress a dreary shade of urinary tract infection. My new shoes had prematurely aged. Hot tears weren’t far away from turning me into an epic disaster.

Xander moved behind me.

“What are you doing?”

Silently—as if he did things any other way—he gently gathered up my hair at the base of my skull, smoothing the strands as he worked, and fastened the bundle with a rubber band that I guess he kept handy for hopeless causes like me. Then he patted me on the head like I was a good doggie and moved around to the front.

“Did you just do my hair?”

He shrugged. His lips twitched as he bit back a smile.

Tears misted my eyes. I brushed them away with the back of my hand and jammed my Hay-Beans onto my nose to hide the redness. Crying isn't something I do prettily. "Let's go see Grandma. You keep an eye out for wolves."

Elias fell into step alongside us just inside the hospital doors.

He squinted at me sideways. "Boss? Is that you?"

"Ignore the head and skin. It's temporary."

He let out a relived sigh. "It's good to see you, boss. I was worried. You and Marika alone in Italy ..."

"I'm just glad the NIS didn't get all three of us."

He tugged at the neck of his black shirt. "They took me back to their van. It was terrible. Do you know how much perfume that woman wears?"

He meant Hera, of course. "It covers up the smell of brimstone, I expect. What did they want?"

"They asked questions—lots of questions—about you and the Family. I told them nothing."

Elias was loyal to my family. Grandma had given him a respectable job after he'd been hired by an Albanian mobster to be an assassin. His first hit was supposed to be yours truly. Instead of gunning me down, Elias switched teams.

I shot him a grateful smile. "How did you get away?"

"Stavros brought them some bad sushi. Hera is probably still in the bathroom."

"I don't think so," a woman's voice said from behind us. I groaned turned around. Hera. Ugh. And damn her. Here I was wearing dirty laundry, while she managed to keep linen pants crisp and unwrinkled. It was unnatural.

"*Christos*," she said, laughing her butt off, "what happened to you? No, don't tell me just yet—I want to look at you and enjoy the moment."

The Armani Hobo's pill had worked magic on the itching, but I was still red and bloated.

I put on my best 'I smell dog poop' face. "Get thee behind me, Satan."

"Wait—stand over there. I want to take a photo so I can remember this forever."

"Go to hell."

"You're only here because we're okay with that," she said. "Time for a little debriefing."

I folded my arms. "No."

“Awww. You say that like you have a choice. You don’t go anywhere until we’ve had a chance to ask our questions.”

“Let me think ... No.”

“We have information about your father’s kidnapping you might find interesting. But you have to give something to get something.”

Now she had my attention. For genuine, reliable information about Dad’s whereabouts I’d do almost anything, including dance on the end of Hera’s string.

“Do you?” I said casually, not wanting to sound desperate.

“Let me think,” she said, the big copycat. “No.”

Argh! That cow. “You’re made of shit. You know that—right?”

She shrugged. “I lied. So?”

Enough was enough. I slammed her shin with the pliable rubber sole of my sad-looking new shoes. Hera’s pants had started the day white. Now, as she hopped around on one foot, they bore a black skid mark down the front.

“You little *skeela*,” she snapped. “Your whole family is going down, starting with you.”

Everything I’d been through these past few days was all her doing. I’d had more than enough of Hera to last a lifetime. My hand snapped out, seizing her by her hair. One little twist of my wrist and gold spooled around my fingers. I jerked her towards the sliding doors.

“Help me,” she called out.

Nobody did. They were too busy watching the one-sided cat fight. Xander stood there with his arms folded. Elias was snickering. And outside, Hera’s band of black-clad zombies were milling around, exchanging glances. My guess was they didn’t like her any more than I did. Hera was beautiful with her long blond hair and her big boobs, but that dream died a swift death every time she opened her mouth. I felt sorry for them having to work with her in close quarters.

I shoved her out the door, giving her a rough shake as I unwound her hair.

“Now stay out!”

I dusted off my hands and stormed back into the lobby, where Xander and Elias were grinning their heads off.

“Now let’s go see Grandma,” I said.

The elevator pinged. The doors parted. Takis was there, slouched alongside the entrance to the ward with his head bowed over his phone. He glanced up as we exited. His face brightened. He opened his mouth, but I cut him off with my hand.

“Don’t even start with me,” I said.

“Your face—”

“Don’t,” Elias said, backing me up. “I just watched her throw the NIS woman outside.” Admiration tinted his words. “You are even smaller.”

Takis puffed out his puny excuse for a chest. “Who are you calling small?”

“If the children’s clothes fit,” I said, but my heart wasn’t in. I’d shot my insult load on Hera, and now I was spent. I just wanted to see Grandma then go back to the family compound and pass out for a few days. “How is Marika?”

“She’s at home with our children where she belongs.”

“Nineteen-fifty called—it wants you back.”

My cousin’s cousin’s cousin looked bewildered. “What did I say?”

“Where’s Grandma?”

As if I could have missed it. At the far end of the ward a mixture of cops and—if I wanted to be technical—robbers were gathered in the hallway. Melas broke away from the pack, swaggering in my direction. Damn, he looked good. Tired—but good. Melas is a shade less than six feet. He’s cut from a narrower piece of marble than Xander but he’s every bit as hard. With his dark honey-colored skin, chocolate eyes, and black hair, the man is a binge eater’s fantasy feast.

Ugh. My face, my skin, my allergic reaction to poison ivy. I wheeled around and made for the elevator. Xander grabbed me, spun me back to face due north.

Detective Nikos Melas’s face broke into a grin. “Katerina?” His gaze slid past me to Xander. They exchanged courteous nods. He slung his arm around my shoulders and sniffed me. “Wow, they don’t shower in Italy?”

“Your girlfriend sent me on vacation without a change of clothes or money. I had to choose between toilet water or the bidet.”

His face scrunched up. “She’s not my girlfriend, and hasn’t been in a long time. Pappas called to let me know what was going on. I would have come to get you myself but I couldn’t get away. Xander volunteered.”

I shot Xander a grateful look. Normally he stuck close to Grandma. He must have been worried if he’d left her side for this long to airlift me out of Greece.

“Where’s the Armani Hobo?” I asked. “Did he come up here?”

Melas said, “Two men went into Baboulas’s room a few minutes ago. They’re in there with your aunt.”

Sure enough, Aldo Fontana and the Armani Hobo were in Grandma’s private room with Grandma and Aunt Rita. What the heck were they doing there? Neither man was family.

My aunt leaped up when she spotted me. She rushed toward me in

a cloud of Poison and platinum blond curls. My father's sibling normally eschewed her natural hair, reaching for one wig or another, depending on the day's outfit. Today was a caftan—very 1970s. "It's so comfortable," she whispered in my ear as she enveloped me. "I don't have to wear underwear."

"Katerina," Grandma said, "I can smell you from here. Two days in Italy and already you have picked up their bad habits."

Grandma was propped up in bed, surrounded by lace-edged pillows I knew didn't belong to the hospital. They weren't Grandma's either; her bed was a simple rectangle with one flat pillow per side and a sedate blue quilt. This was Aunt Rita's doing, obviously.

"Three days. I'll do better next time I'm abducted and dumped by the NIS. Hera's so happy with me now that I'll be lucky if she doesn't abandon me in the desert with a bottle of salt water and an asp in a basket of figs." I kissed her on both cheeks, Greek-style. "What happened?"

Grandma waved it off. "It was nothing. Just a little fall."

"A little fall." Aunt Rita rolled her eyes. "Her hip is broken."

"How?"

"I slipped," Grandma said.

"She was dancing on a table," Aunt Rita said.

I raised both eyebrows. "Dancing on a table?"

Aunt Rita filled in the blank that really mattered. Her voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "She had been eating some of her special *koulourakia*."

To help combat the nausea resulting from chemotherapy, my grandmother did magical baking. Brownies weren't really a Greek thing, so instead Grandma was baking her herbal pain relief into twisty cookies. Grandma had access to the best pot her money could buy. Aunt Rita, Papou, and I had spent an afternoon contemplating the universe after we stumbled upon her baking and mistook the green bits for oregano or spinach. Then Xander came along and confiscated the cookies.

Now I was thinking weed in her baked goods wasn't such a great idea—not if she wound up falling off tables and busting her hip.

"Now I have to sit around on my *kolos* until this heals." Grandma made a face that told me exactly what she thought about her situation. "It could be a while."

No kidding. The cancer and chemo would add extra time to her recuperation period. "Do you have to stay here?"

"They are sending me home the day after tomorrow, but I will be in a wheelchair. Can you believe it? Me in a wheelchair like that old *malakas*. Now Papou will want to race me all over the courtyard, and he will win because he has had more practice."

“Just hook your wheelchair up to Xander and make him run.” I couldn’t help stealing a glance at Xander. As expected, his face was passive. He wasn’t big on showing emotion. I wasn’t sure he had any, although I had seen him smile and heard him laugh. His vow of silence didn’t extend towards humor, thankfully.

“You could invest in a riding crop,” Aunt Rita said.

The blood drained out of Xander’s face. He looked away. The man who never lost his composure was rattled. Just as quickly he was back to carefully composed normal.

I didn’t know much about Xander, but I knew his entire family was dead and that his entire back was covered with a waterfall of scars. Interestingly—and inexplicably—Melas also wore nearly identical scars on his back. The two men went way back but I didn’t know how or why, and I didn’t like to ask. If either man wanted me to know they’d tell me.

“Maybe,” I said, moving the conversation out of painful terrain, “we could buy her one of those motorized scooters. Papou would never outrun her in one of those.”

“He does not know those exist,” Grandma said. “Can you imagine how unbearable he would be in a scooter? Honk-honk all day long.” She shook her hands at the ceiling, then winced. “How am I supposed to bake in this condition, eh?”

Baking was her stress release, her way of dealing and processing, working through problems. With busy hands she bought herself time to think and scheme.

“Katerina can help you,” Aunt Rita suggested.

Grandma crossed herself.

“I can cook,” I said in my defense. Which was true, I could, but Grandma and I didn’t work well together in the kitchen. I asked too many questions and Grandma left too many questions unanswered. Plus she made little faces as I carried out her instructions.

“Katerina.” Grandma gestured to the bedside table. “Pass me my phone.”

I reached over to grab the iPhone and raised my eyebrows at its new exterior. “New case?”

Previously in a plain case, Grandma’s phone was now wrapped in a white doily.

“From a cousin,” Grandma said, waving her hand at the crocheted phone cover. “She said the coffee cup told her she would make it for me.”

Greece: where logic had the stability of quicksand.

“Nice,” I said, handing her the phone. Her hand shook; heavy-duty hospital drugs, probably. The phone fell, and I bobbed down to grab it.

Something tumbled out of my pocket. We all looked at the object laying on the floor, big pink plus sign facing up. Then everyone looked at me.

I jumped backwards, away from the evidence, but the damage was already done.

Grandma fastened her steely gaze to my face. "Is there something you want to tell me?"

"It's not mine!"

Aunt Rita threw her arm around my shoulder. "It's okay. We will figure this out, eh? Greece is a country with options. You could marry the father—"

"There's no father!"

Horried gasps all around.

Wow. For people who killed, stole, and dealt drugs for a living, they sure were judgmental.

"It's not—"

I stopped cold. Melas was standing in the doorway, staring down at Marika's pregnancy test. His gaze slowly rose to meet mine.

"It's not what?" He kept his voice neutral.

"Not mine!"

"My wife said the same thing when she was pregnant with our first," Aunt Rita said.

"My wife said the same thing," Aldo Fontana said from his corner. "What she meant was that it was not mine."

"You've got issues—I get that," I said to the elderly Italian man. "But this test doesn't belong to me."

Melas scrutinized me. "Then why have you got it?"

"I found it."

Their expressions shifted from horrified to appalled. What kind of person picked up discarded—used—pregnancy tests?

I was wondering that myself.

Christ on a crouton, I was making things worse. I crouched down, snatched up the test, shoved it back into my pocket. Out of Grandma's hospital room I stomped, turning back when I remembered I had no money, no keys, and no desire to hike all the way back to the compound.

"Does anyone have change for the bus?" I asked hopefully.

Melas rattled his keys. "Come on, I'm going your way."

Melas's family lives in Makria, the village closest to the family compound. The village was named after my family, and its citizens are loyal to Grandma. During the Reign of the Colonels, when the military seized control of the government, in the late sixties, early seventies, Grandma saved a lot of lives and kept a lot of secrets.

People from Makria aren't scared of Grandma. People outside of

Makria are definitely scared of Grandma. Not me—mostly. Melas's mother, on the other hand, has played the lead in several of my nightmares. Unbeknownst to her children, she was once Grandma's torturer. Given what I know about the woman I could definitely envision her inflicting pain on humanity, and enjoying the screams while sipping iced coffee.

"You won't make me have coffee with your mother, will you?"

"In those clothes?" He eyed my bedraggled dress. New a couple of weeks ago, its lifecycle had run its course. Probably I'd have to burn it and hope the smoke didn't destroy what was left of the ozone layer. "You have nothing to worry about."

Melas didn't say another word until we exited the elevator. Hera and her clan of slightly lesser morons were waiting in the lobby. She uncrossed her endless legs and swished her hips in our direction as soon as the doors opened.

"Great," I muttered.

"She's not that bad," he said.

"You're right—she's worse."

Hera rubbed her hands together gleefully. "Nikos, you brought me a purple moose. You're so sweet." Her eyes hardened. "Okay, time for your debriefing."

"This went pretty badly for you last time," I said. "Are you sure you want to try again?"

Melas looked from her to me. "What happened?"

"Nothing for you to worry about or even know about," Hera said, charm oozing out of her pores. She gave a pretty shrug. "It's a girl thing."

"That's the difference between us," I said. "You're a girl, I'm a woman. Now scram."

Her eyebrows took a long, fast walk up her forehead. "Scram?"

"Do you people not have *Sesame Street*? Oscar the Grouch? And you call yourselves civilized." I pushed past Hera yet again. Why couldn't she just get on her broomstick and flit back to her coven?

"You have to talk to me," she told my back.

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do."

I turned around. "Does your boss know you kidnapped an American citizen? Does his boss? How about his boss? Do they know the only reason you bounced me out of Greece was because you're trying to get your boyfriend back and you think I'm in the way?"

Hera's face turned the endearing purple-red of a baboon's tailpipe. "That's not true."

I glanced at Melas behind her. His expression was unreadable. "Yeah," I said, "it is." I nailed Hera in the face with a snooty mean-girl

look. "Could you be more obvious?"

"Does he know you're pregnant?" she snapped.

"Oh, for crying out loud," I shouted. "I'm not pregnant!"

Like a late-summer hurricane in Florida, I stormed out of the hospital, not stopping until I reached the road. In my fit of completely justified anger I'd bypassed my ride. If I turned back now I'd look like a goober. I was already filthy; I didn't want to add looking like a nitwit to the damage, so I turned right and set off along the busy Volos street.

Everything looked different on foot. A passing truck shot a cloud of diesel fumes into the air, triggering an immediate coughing fit. Brakes screeched. Horns howled. The air had a metallic flavor. Hopefully I wouldn't get lost on the way back to Grandma's. If I could find the road that led to Mount Pelion, I might get back to the compound before the small cell carcinoma set up shop in my lungs.

A car pulled up alongside me. The window rolled down.

"You looking for a date?" Melas called out.

I kept my eyes on the horizon. "No."

"I am. So how about you get in and I'll take you home. Get cleaned up, maybe I'll buy you dinner."

Hmm ... that didn't sound so bad. My stomach was already launching a protest about the no-food situation. "Could this dinner be *moussaka*?"

"Anything you want. I have to warn you though, I need to visit Mama on the way."

"Do I have to see your mother?"

"You can wait in the car."

I shot him a dirty look.

"Or ... I can drop you off first, go see her, and then come back for you."

I sniffed. "I guess that would be okay."

Melas stopped the police car and reached over to open the door. "Come on, baby. You're making me unpopular here."

He was right. Traffic was lining up behind him and the horns were apoplectic. That he was a cop in a cop car didn't cut any ice with Greek drivers. Too much longer and they'd abandon their vehicles to wave their hands in his face and yell obscenities. The Virgin Mary would feature heavily in their rantings, along with an assortment of other religious figures, farm animals, and his mother's privates.

They wouldn't talk about his mother that way if they knew Kyria Mela. With one glance she could burn them and their mothers to the ground.

Reluctantly, I climbed into the police car and buckled up.

"You promise you won't take me to see your mother?"

“I promise ...”

My eyes narrowed. There was an invisible “but” at the end of that sentence, so I supplied it for him.

Melas shrugged. “She loves Italy and she wants to hear all about your trip. Not tonight, but soon.”

“It wasn’t a trip, it was an abduction!”

“Do it for me, okay? She’ll nag me into an early grave otherwise.”

“What do I get out of it?”

He leaned closer. His breath warmed my ear ... and other places south of the border in the underwear I’d been wearing for three days. “Anything you want,” he said in his low, sexy voice.

“Anything?”

“Anything.”

Leaning my head on the headrest I closed my eyes and smiled. “Anything. I’ll remember that.”

There was cheering as I padded through the family compound’s courtyard.

Did I say cheering? I meant jeering. My mistake. I took solace in the fact that if they got to be too much I could possibly order them killed.

Family; a few weeks ago I’d had none ... or so I thought. Now I had a full complement of relatives, and I was growing attached to even the worst of them.

“What is that smell?” one of the cousins called out.

“Smells like Italians to me,” another one said.

“Smells like your mother,” I yelled at them.

My cousins—second cousins, most of them—cackled. There was a lot of thigh slapping involved, and some hand signals that recommended I do things that were popular in German and Japanese porn.

“*Skasmos*,” Marika screeched at the cousins from her apartment’s balcony. “What is wrong with you all? There are children playing!”

“They’ve heard it all before from their own father,” someone fired back.

“Try me,” Marika said, giving him the pointy ‘don’t you dare’ finger. “I will cut off your *archidia* and serve them with *skordalia*.” She waved to me. “Katerina! Come up!”

Everything tasted better with the garlic and bread sauce, except maybe balls.

I trotted closer to the balcony and looked up, hand shielding my eyes. “Are you okay?”

Marika's face was thunderstorm dark. "First chance I get I am going to kill Hera."

"Me, too."

"I will take video and put it on YouTube," Donk's voice said from behind her.

I raised my eyebrow. What was Baby Dimitri's nephew doing in Marika and Takis' apartment? When I asked, Marika said, "I felt sorry for him. Do you see how skinny he is? Bones. How can he be a man when he has no meat on him."

"Hey, I have meat where it matters," Donk said.

Marika rolled her eyes. "Greek men are pigs."

"That's all men, I think," I said.

I waved goodbye and trotted toward Grandma's shack. My goat was on the far side of the compound, chilling in the shade with a passel of the family dogs. He bleated when he spotted me and trip-trapped over for a head scratch. About twelve feet away he stopped. His ears assumed the 'hell no' position, then he backtracked and skedaddled back to his canine posse. Apparently I was too stinky for a goat. That's how low I'd sunk.

An hour later, I finally made my exit from Grandma's bathroom, semi-human. My clothes were clean, my hair was shiny, and with a generous layer of makeup I could pretend I was a real girl again. Too bad about the pumpkin on my shoulders.

Melas was in the courtyard shooting the breeze with Takis and Stavros when I emerged. He gave me a long appraising look and a flash of his bad-boy smile.

"Nice dress," he said. His appreciation stopped when it got to my head.

Forgiving him for the head thing, I was hit with a sudden attack of shyness. "You like it?"

"I like it."

"You like it?" Takis mocked. Stavros slapped his arm. Takis shot him a dirty look. "What?"

"Leave her alone," Stavros said.

"Leave her alone," Takis mimicked in a girly voice. "What's the matter with you? Did you grow a *mouni* where your *poutsas* used to be?"

"If he did, he evolved," I said. "Talk to your wife lately?"

Takis' eyes darted from side to side. "Maybe. Why?"

I made a face. "No reason."

"Come on, Katerina. Talk to me. What did I do wrong this time?"

"You tell me."

Two palms up. "It was one strip club, okay? I didn't even look. I collected the money and left—that's all. Marika understands. She

knows the business is the business.”

I shrugged. “Hey, don’t look at me. Keep me out of your marital issues.”

Takis muttered something under his breath. Something about my dead mother’s privates. Nothing is sacred when it comes to Greek insults. Given that Mom had been married to a Greek, I was sure she understood her body was up for grabs when the conversation heated up.

Takis hot-tailed it out of there, headed away from the apartment he shared with Marika and their sons. Time—and my patience—were running out; Marika needed to tell him about the impending baby. Maybe then everyone would quit thinking I was the expectant mother. I was already sick of pregnancy—and I wasn’t even pregnant.

Five minutes later we were in Melas’s car, easing down the long dirt and stone driveway that stretched from the compound’s gates to the narrow road threaded through the mountain. The route was scenic. Some Makris ancestor had planted an olive grove on the wide patch of land, possibly for subterfuge.

Melas didn’t look too shabby either. Dark gray slacks, pale blue button-down shirt folded to mid-forearm, revealing a generous expanse of tanned, muscular forearm. Unconsciously, without a shred of permission from the smart part of my brain, I licked my lips.

Melas glanced over. He looked entirely too happy with himself. “I saw that.”

“You saw nothing.”

“Yeah, I saw that.”

He took the road to the waterfront where restaurants, *tavernas*, and coffee shops lined the street. The city was just now sealing off both ends of the road so that traffic couldn’t flow, creating a safe space where Greeks could wave their hands, talk loudly, and pace without getting hit by cars. It was a place to see and be seen. We hadn’t come alone. Elias followed from a discreet distance, fully armed and dressed like a swarthy ninja.

Melas chose a table inches from the darkening water. Colored lights flickered on the surface. Pretty. Carefree. Our conversation was casual, lightly flirtatious, until it took a U-bend of a personal turn.

“Hey ...” Melas slung his arm around the back of my chair “... you could have just told me there was someone else.”

“Is this the baby thing again?”

“Yes.”

“It’s not mine.”

He didn’t look convinced.

“Are you kidding me?” I demanded. “You believe Hera over me?”

“No ...”

"And by 'no' you mean 'yes'."

"Look, I've known Hera a long time. She's a lot of things but she's not a liar."

How dumb was he? Pretty damn dumb, apparently. "You sure about that?"

"She is as honest as it gets, and she has more integrity than most in her position." He winked at me. "Nice breasts, too."

I flung my napkin in his face, frustrated that his masculine vitals were safely concealed under the table. "You're a donkey's ass!"

He tipped back his head and laughed, then curled his fingers around my wrist and reeled me in for a kiss. It wasn't a big thing—a warm stamp on my forehead—but it heated me up in all the right-wrong places. I didn't want to be turned on by Nikos Melas. He was a lying rat bastard. Or at least he was about this. I was miffed, okay?

"Relax, I know it's not yours. You're not that good a liar, baby." I opened my mouth to protest but was interrupted by the waiter returning with a tray of *mezedes*—appetizers. Melas transferred a couple of bites of formerly flaming *halloumi* cheese to my plate and then served himself before continuing. "Let me guess—the test is Marika's?"

I nodded dumbly.

"And Takis doesn't know?"

"Not yet."

"She should tell him."

"Marika's in denial. You've met their kids. Would you want another one?"

He cut a *dolmada* in half with his fork and swallowed both pieces before answering. "They're just kids being kids."

"Yeah ... in the jungle."

"I wouldn't mind half a dozen children." He flashed a grin in my open-mouthed direction. "Not with Marika though. Why not tell everyone it's hers?"

I was still stuck on the idea of Melas with six kids. He already had a child who was the result of a clandestine affair with one of the family's wives. I didn't know who she was, and I'd never ask. That way I could deny everything in the event I was tortured. "Uh ... she asked me not to tell."

"You're a good friend." Another *dolmada* vanished into his mouth.

It was nice that he thought so. All I knew is that I'd made her a promise that I was doing everything I could to keep.

When it came, the interruption came out of nowhere. A woman who was at least eighty percent butter and twenty percent rock shoved a finger up under Melas's nose, putting a halt to his eating process. She wore top to bottom black, including a black kerchief, and

her knee-high stockings (black, of course) had given in to gravity and were now puddling around what might have once been ankles.

"You are that policeman," she said. Before either of us could speak her finger swung around. "And you are Katerina Makri's pregnant granddaughter. What happened to your head?"

"Allergies." I raised my hand. "Also, not pregnant."

She made a face commonly seen at lynch mobs. "I saw you in the newspaper with this one and that other man. Marry this one—he has a good job. So what if it is not his baby? More than one Greek man is raising someone else's child." The finger swung around yet again. "Tsk. You should make an honest woman of her."

"I'm trying," he said, "but she won't have me."

That was news to me.

To the old widow, that was an opportunity to hoist me onto a cross. "What is wrong with you, eh? You want to be an unwed mother? Where is your honor? Marry the man."

Something inside me snapped. I slapped my napkin on the table, shoved back my chair and climbed up onto its square platform. It wasn't a soapbox, but under the circumstances it would do the job. And what was a soapbox anyway? I'd have to Google that later.

Hands cupped around my mouth I yelled, "My name is Katerina Makris—with an S, and I'm not pregnant. DO YOU HEAR ME?"

All along the length of the promenade, life stopped. Waiters paused mid-street with their fully loaded trays. Diners froze, forks trapped in the empty space between mouth and plate. Heads turned. Just to make this an international announcement, I delivered the message in two languages, hoping I'd covered at least seventy-five percent of the audience.

The old woman shuffled away, accompanied by Elias, who had a firm grip on her elbow.

"Everybody hears you." Melas grinned up at me. "This is probably on YouTube already."

"I don't even care. I just want everyone to stop thinking I'm pregnant. BECAUSE I'M NOT PREGNANT. DO YOU KNOW HOW LONG IT'S BEEN SINCE I HAD SEX?"

"I'm guessing a while. We could change that. Tonight."

My eyes narrowed to vicious slits.

On the table my phone shivered and shook. Melas handed it up to me.

"Hey, Katerina, guess what? You are on the Internet," Stavros said. My heart sank. "Already?"

"It's streaming. Hey ... and there you are talking to me."

There was an awkward silence.

"Stavros ... Are you waving?"

“How did you know?” He sounded sheepish.

I shook my head. “No reason. Did you want something?”

“There’s a man here at the front gate looking for you.”

“A man? What man?”

“How do I know? He said the two of you have a dinner date.”

Oh, brother. This had to be Grandma’s doing. Even safely ensconced on the hospital she was meddling with my love life, trying to auction me off to the highest bidder. Thus far she’d tried to marry me off to a middle-aged burnout named after a parrot, one assassin whose target at the time was me, and one of her enemies’ offspring. If you ask me, her judgment was flawed.

“What does he look like?”

I heard him making a face. “Not good looking like Elias but not ugly like Takis either.”

There was a snarl, then Takis’ voice bit into my ear. “Who are you calling ugly, *malakas*? You look in the mirror recently?”

“Tell Takis to shut his pie hole,” I said. Everyone was slowly returning to their food and socializing. Phones vanished back into their pockets. I was old news now that I’d stopped ranting. Something crazier was bound to come along soon, and by God, their phones would be ready when it did.

I smoothed my dress. Sat.

“Can you take a picture?” I asked my cousin.

“Of what?”

“The man.”

“Great idea,” Stavros said, “I should do that.”

A moment later my phone pinged. Incoming text from Stavros. I tapped on the photo, enlarged it. He was right, the guy in the picture was neither attractive or hideous. He didn’t look familiar to me, either. Reluctant relief washed over me; part of me thought it might have been Mario, hunting for his hostages and father, still sore about his shot foot. This guy wasn’t Mario, and he was clutching a bouquet of yellow roses. Nice.

“No name?”

Mumbled voices. Then: “He says his name is Petros Vlahos and that he is a doctor.”

A doctor of what, that was the question. “Probably a nickname,” I muttered, thinking along the lines of Doctor Doom or Doctor Death and Destruction. I shoved the phone across the table to Melas.

After a long look he said, “Yeah, I know him. He’s one of Baboulas’s doctors. He’s a good guy.” He passed the phone back.

Huh. A genuine physician. What was Grandma up to?

“Thank him for the flowers,” I told Stavros, “and ask him if we can reschedule, please.”

There was some back and forth, words I couldn't make out clearly, then Stavros came back. "Tomorrow night?"

"Perfect," I said. When I looked up Melas was sitting there, stunned. "What?"

"Are you actually going out with him?"

"Yes?"

"I thought we had a thing."

"And I thought we agreed we couldn't have a thing." With my fork, I pointed to him then myself. "Policeman. Mobster's granddaughter. We're like Romeo and Juliet, except without the poison, death, and underage sex."

"I wouldn't say no to the sex," he said.

Neither would I ... except that's what I was doing, wasn't I? Where was a wall to bang my head on when I needed one?

"It's a slippery slope," I said. "A slippery sex slope. We could do the friends-with-benefits thing but it's only a matter of time until things get complicated."

He gave me one of his charming bad-boy smiles. "I'm as uncomplicated as it gets."

"Wrong. There's Hera, remember? If she gets even a whiff of us as anything more substantial than complete strangers, she'll leap off the rails, stuff me in a cannon, and fire me into Morocco."

"She doesn't have to know."

"She'll know. Women always do. Women like Hera definitely do. I wouldn't be surprised if she's watching us right now."

Melas glanced around. He had the look of a man on his way to the proctologist. "I caught her bugging my house the other day. I went home early to grab something and she was there with a whole team."

I almost laughed. Almost. "What did she say?"

"That she was worried about my welfare because of my association with your family."

An unladylike snort popped out of my nose. "I'm sure."

He leaned in close, gave me one of those seductive, bad-boy looks guys like him do so well. "So you want to come back to my place?"

"With your house bugged? No thanks."

"It's not bugged now."

"That you know of. Hera isn't exactly the kind of person who lets a little thing like discovery get in her way."

He leaned back, folded his arms, delivered a smug smile. "I know. Which is why I had some of your family's best come and scrub the place. It's clean—guaranteed."

"You know they probably installed their own, right?"

"They wouldn't."

I smiled.

“Would they?”

I said nothing.

“*Ai sto dialo*,” he said. *Go to the devil.*

“So that’s a ‘thanks but no thanks’ on coming back to your place. I don’t really want to be entertainment for my whole family.”

“You’re right,” he said. “You’d be very entertaining.” His soft, warm eyes grazed me from head to waist and before locking onto mine.

I swallowed. “You think?”

“And loud.”

“I’m as quiet as a mouse in bed.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” Our food came. He waited until the server left, then he said, “With me you’d be screaming.” His grin was pure cat who got a big lick of cream. “And begging.”

Yowza.

Chapter 12

“HEY, Katerina, tell us: how long as it been since you had sex?”

Cackles echoed off the courtyard’s walls. Everyone in my family was a comedian. Lucky me.

“Not as long as it’s been for most of you,” I called out.

Beside me, Melas was laughing his ass off. Glaring at him only made his shoulders shake harder. “You were the one who had to announce it to the world,” he said.

“Want me to shoot them?” Elias said from behind us.

“No, it’s okay. If they’re dead I won’t be able to make their lives miserable,” I told him.

Elias grinned. “Great idea. You in for the night?”

“I plan to be sound asleep about ten minutes from now.”

He saluted and jogged off in the direction of his quarters on the bottom level.

Melas walked me back to Grandma’s yard, with its lush potted garden. Was I supposed to water the plants in her absence? I suddenly realized that as much as I’d learned about Grandma and my family, I still knew pretty much nothing. Everything reliable and real to me was thousands of miles away ... and yet it felt like mist—intangible and thin, dissipating every time I tried to recall how home felt. Greece was solidifying by the day. This reality was imprinting itself over the old. My plan starting out had been to stay as long as it took to find Dad and bring him home safely, then I’d get back to living my same-old life. It wasn’t a bad plan. I loved my old life. It was comfortable. A favorite pair of jeans and snuggly sweater kind of life. Lacking in excitement maybe, but that’s okay. Excitement wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. It was too unpredictable.

“Hey,” Melas said, “where did you go just now?”

My smile was tight, a rubber band holding back a torrent of tears. “Home.”

“It’s been an interesting summer, no?”

“Too interesting. I could use some predictability and certainty.”

He pulled back, scratched his head, mulled things over for a moment. “Okay,” he said. “I can work with that. Here’s something certain for you. Before I say goodnight I’m going to kiss you. That okay with you?”

“It’s a certainty *and* you’re giving me a choice? Yeah, it’s okay.” More than okay. For all my posturing about how this twain could

never meet, I really wanted to lock lips with Melas again. He'd done it once and my toes had curled right up. This morning had involved poison ivy, near death, and helicopter rescues. I needed the day to end on a high note before I collapsed into an exhausted heap. "But you'll have to make it soon before I pass out."

He chuckled. "I'd tuck you in but I have no doubt there's a gun aimed at my back."

The family had more than one sniper whose job it was to hang out on the rooftops. "Probably your head."

"Probably. Anyway, your reputation is safe with me—tonight, anyway—and I'll be leaving here with my head on my shoulders. Are you ready?"

I nodded. Gulped.

Closing my eyes seemed like the right thing to do but I couldn't do it. His gaze was too hot, too deep for me to break free. His face turned serious. Finger under my chin, he tilted my head up and lowered his lips to mine. It was sweet, soft, gently arousing, until he turned the heat up with his roaming hands. My body wanted to stand here and burn.

Then, mid-kiss, I yawned.

Melas chuckled. He touched his forehead to mine and folded his arms around me.

"It's not the company, I swear."

"You need sleep," he said, low and deep. "And I need a cold shower. I've been taking a lot of those since I met you."

"Good thing it's summer."

"Winter is coming." He released me. "Maybe you'll join me in a hot shower before that happens."

I yawned again. The sandman was getting to be a real nag.

He kissed the tip of my still-bloated nose. "There will be other nights and other kisses. Good night, Katerina."

It was stupid o'clock in the morning when two panic-stricken thoughts yanked me out of my sleep: earthquake or poltergeist?

My sense of logic was already on the job, having already eliminated several other possibilities, including a significant other spanking the monkey while watching porn on his cellphone under the covers, and a scratching dog.

I was single.

And I didn't have a dog.

What I did have was a shaking bed, and, because of my proximity to the bed, a shaking body.

“Earthquake.” Without a shred of conviction, the word crept out of my mouth.

“Katerina ...”

My name floated over me like a garlic-scented shroud.

I closed my eyes. Poltergeist it was then. What was the Greek protocol for dealing with violent spirits? Rubbing alcohol or vinegar?

“Katerina?”

I opened one eye. The sun had barely scraped its teeth on the horizon, but it was enough to reveal pieces of a terrible face. One of the undead creature’s parents had been a Shar Pei, the other, the Colombia Gorge. Somewhere nearby, a bird screeched. It was a sound straight out of Hell. Greece: where every day had the potential to be a Hitchcock movie.

“Katerina,” the demon’s voice said again, “are you awake?”

Now it sounded familiar. I sat bolt upright.

“Papou?” I squinted at the ravines that formed his face. “Is that you?”

“Did you talk to the eagle doctor yet?”

“Eagle doctor?” I hoisted the sheet to my chin. “What are you talking about?”

The shaking stopped. I felt Papou plop back in his wheelchair. “The eagle doctor. Yiorgos still refuses to do eagle things.”

“What things?”

“I keep throwing mice at him and ... nothing.”

A small hammer began to bang around behind my eyes. It was too early for this, and I was too tired. “You mean the guy at the pet shop?”

“If he knows about eagles ... yes, that is who I mean. He needs to fix the broken eagle you gave me.”

“No, I haven’t talked to him yet. I’ve been a little bit busy, what with being kidnapped by the NIS and all.”

“They did not give you a phone call?”

“They didn’t give me a phone.”

He snorted with derision. “Law enforcement these days ... they have no manners, no honor. In my day they gave you a phone call. Too bad they didn’t give you a phone call. You could have called the eagle doctor.”

Yeah, because that’s what I would have used my one call for. “I’ll see him later, okay?”

“Later ... later ... always later. I don’t have later. I could be dead by then. I could be dead in the next five minutes—maybe sooner.”

Papou was a man with a death wish. The truth was he had a lot in common with a cockroach: he and the bugs, they’d outlive us all in a nuclear winter.

“Five whole minutes?”

He shrugged. “It could happen, especially if I roll into the pool from the roof.”

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and swung my feet out of bed. “I’ll go see the eagle guy when the pet store opens. Stay away from the roof until then, okay?”

“Okay.”

He rolled away in his wheelchair. A few moments later the screen door banged shut.

I was alone. Again. I couldn’t sleep after that, so I grabbed my phone and cruised my usual online haunts. Okay, mostly just Facebook. On Facebook I could read about other people’s normal lives. Facebook enabled me to live vicariously. I could be a soccer mom and a frazzled wife. I could blow off work for a sick day.

I lived vicariously for a couple of hours, until my stomach made noises about how it could eat.

Breaking Greek social protocol, I went to the kitchen barefoot.

And screamed.

Chapter 13

UNBEKNOWNST TO ME, Grandma had set up extra security so that nobody could breathe in her shack without security recording the whole thing.

One of my cousins explained this to me in the yard, while two others stood on the far side of the fence, grinning. The second I screamed they'd dispatched a security team to check out the situation.

The situation was an unexpected encounter between me and Yiorgos, Papou's eagle. Papou had decided I'd be more inclined to talk to the eagle expert if the eagle was in my custody.

Apparently this was h-i-l-a-r-i-o-u-s. Which it would have been if it hadn't been captured on hidden camera ... and if it had happened to someone who wasn't me.

The eagle in question was hunched on the back of a chair, expression decidedly indignant. Unblinking, he stared at us through the screen door, trying to decide if we were a big breakfast or a light lunch.

I inched toward the gate.

Takis arrived next. He cackled when the cousins brought him up to speed. "You should put a blanket over his head," he said, peering through the screen door. "That way he will think it is night and go back to sleep."

I glanced at the bird through the screen door. "Do you think that'll work?"

"Sure. I saw it on TV. Would they put something on the TV if it was not true?"

Somebody didn't know about American cable news channels. "Can't we just put him in a cage or something?"

"Cage? What cage? Who puts an eagle in a cage?"

"I have to get him to the pet shop somehow."

Takis and the other cousins stood around, trading quips and grins—all of them at my expense.

What would Grandma do?

"I need a cage," I said. "Can someone please get me one?"

Their conversation continued without me.

"It puts the lotion on its skin or else it gets the hose again," I muttered. I could have yelled it and they wouldn't have listened. Grandma, being an avid gardener, kept a hose coiled in her yard at all times. Nobody noticed when I reached for the hose and turned the tap

to full. Probably they thought I was going to water the flowers.

A full second later, the compound came alive with the sound of squealing men.

"What's the matter?" I called out over their shrieking. "It's just a bit of water!"

"I'm going to kill you," Takis shouted.

"Try it and you're a dead man," came a voice from up high. I turned around and gave my cousin on the rooftop two thumbs up. He gave me one back. I knew firsthand what he could do with a sniper rifle.

I turned off the hose, curled it up in neat bundle, and set it back where it belonged. There was a slow clapping from the other side of Grandma's fence. Predictably, there was a body attached to the clapping hands. Male. Late forties maybe. Skin that had seen a light dose of childhood chickenpox. Verging on six foot, but not quite crossing the line. Hair cut into a basic, stylish shape. Well-dressed in a narrow-lapelled suit. The guy knew European fashion and wore it well.

Takis grinned. "*Malaka*, what are you doing here?"

"Checking on Mama," he said. It was all very manly the way they shook hands, hugged, and slapped each other's backs. The new arrival repeated the gesture with the other cousins, then he turned to me, arms open.

My eyebrows rose. "Uh, hello?"

"You don't know who I am, do you?"

"You're not another one of Grandma's blind dates, are you?"

"My Virgin Mary," he said to Takis, "is Baboulas trying to find her a husband already?"

Takis shrugged. "Better to do it now before Katerina chooses someone unsuitable."

"Hello." I waved my hands at them. "I'm standing right here."

The new guy flashed his double row of off-white pearls at me. "Come and give your uncle a hug, eh?"

My uncle Kostas? The ground lurched under my feet.

This was my infamous Uncle Kostas, the one who was all tangled up in counterfeiting and Winkler's dirty laundry? He was downright fashionable and reasonably good-looking. What was he doing here?

Dazed, I offered my hand. He enveloped it in his, laughed, and reeled me in for a big, back slapping hug. Then he held me at arms length and kissed me on both cheeks.

"Very pretty," he said. "You must get that from your mother because your father was always ugly." Ho-ho-ho. Funny guy that Uncle Kostas. "Feel better after some sleep and a shower?"

"Uh, yes?"

“How is the rash?”

“Mostly gone.” And my head was back to its normal non-blimpish size.

He peered over my shoulder. “I don’t suppose Mama left any desserts inside before her tabletop incident.”

I glanced back at the closed screen door. “There’s an eagle in there. Probably best if you stay out here.”

He looked surprised. “An eagle?”

“Caw-caw.” Takis flapped his arms.

“That’s a crow,” I said.

“Eagle.”

We were going around in circles again. Meanwhile, my alleged uncle was standing there watching us, a big grin smeared across his face. There was something familiar about him, which was to be expected. He had the family nose, and every so often I glimpsed bits of my father in him. Not Aunt Rita so much, but then she buried her face under a mountain of expensive cosmetics before tackling the day.

“Have you seen Grandma yet?” I asked him. “Are you staying here at the compound?”

He looked puzzled. “We saw her yesterday together. You don’t remember?”

Italy must have shaken me up more than I realized. I looked him over and tried to shove puzzle pieces into other puzzle pieces.

Then it hit slapped me upside the head.

“The Armani Hobo! You’re the Armani Hobo?”

He winced. “You couldn’t have come up with a different name?”

Beside me, Takis cackled. “Armani Hobo. That is funny.”

Uncle Kostas slapped him upside the head. Takis winced but he kept on laughing.

“I didn’t know you were my uncle when I gave you the name, but it’s not so bad when you think about it,” I said. “You were following us around Naples, peeing on everything. It could have been so much worse.”

“The Pissing Armani Hobo,” Takis said, cracking up again. “Marika told me how he was peeing on this, peeing on that. You need some antibiotics, Kostas? That’s what happens when you stick your *pouts* in bratwurst.”

My uncle shook his head. “Maybe a little boy like you can fit yours in a sausage, but a grown man can’t.”

Takis pinkened when the other cousins laughed at him.

My uncle offered me his arm. “Walk with me, Katerina. We have much to talk about.”

I yaWned.

Whether it was my uncle's company or the slow meandering through the cool orchard, I couldn't say.

My uncle didn't notice. He was too busy enjoying the sound of his own voice to pay attention to little things like other people. He was babbling about Germany and how he was going solo with his own gang—my word, not his—and how it was going to be the best. The most successful ever. According to my Uncle Kostas they were going to conquer the world. I wondered if Grandma knew about his plans for global domination. A normal parent wants bigger, better things for their children, but Grandma wasn't a normal parent. She wasn't a normal anything. Even as far as criminals went, she was an odd duck.

I was busy not listening when the subject switched to me.

"I know Mama. She's worried about whether or not you've got what it takes to lead the family."

"I don't want to lead the family," I said.

"What Baboulas wants, Baboulas gets. One way or another."

"You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink."

"Maybe not immediately. But if you make it thirsty—thirstier than it has been in its life—then it will drink. Me, I'm good at making horses thirsty. Very good at making horses thirsty. Mama, she's good at making horses thirsty, too."

Note to self: check on any horses in the vicinity.

"Is that what's she doing, making me thirsty?"

"What makes you think I am privy to Baboulas's plans?" He clapped me on the shoulder. "I've been in Germany a long time. My life is there now. All I hear are the highlights."

"Do you know anything about Dad's disappearance?"

"No. If I knew anything I would tell Mama."

Excuse me if I didn't exactly believe him. He'd done nothing to win my trust so far ... except sort of save my bacon a couple of times. Not divulging his identity back in Italy struck me as sneaky, underhanded, and pointless.

"What's Dad's connection to Winkler?"

"Michail and Winkler?" He shrugged. "No connection. Why?"

I told him what little I knew, that the company Dad had been working for all this time existed in name only—a name that was owned by Winkler.

My uncle's face gave nothing away. "And you discovered this ... how?"

"It wasn't difficult. In fact, it was so simple a child could do it."

A child had done some of it. Little Tomas, one of the cousin's kids, was in the right place at the right time. He'd told me what he'd heard, enabling me to do a smidgen of basic math.

“You’ve got brains—that’s good. But do you have guts? That’s the big question. Anyone who takes control of this family when the time comes will have to have guts and balls. It’s easy to tell people what to do, but if you can’t follow through then you will be dead within a day. Good people earn respect. People like us—” He clenched his fist “—we have to seize respect. We’re good at seizing respect. You? You’re family, but nobody knows you. Not really. You want this family to continue to be great? Show them you are strong. Give them something to respect. Seize respect from them, whether they want to give it or not.”

He was wrong—dead wrong—and I told him so. “Ask anyone in Makria about Grandma and respect. She earned every drop they give her. And she wouldn’t expect me to shoot someone to prove myself, but she would be pleased if I could think outside the box, which is what I try to do.”

We’d reached the edge of the orchard, where flora met fauna. Fauna around here meant sheep, goats, and the sinus-punching stench of chickens confined to a coop. Flies buzzed happily around a steaming pile of animal poop; Greece’s future was in jeopardy, but these insects knew exactly where their next meal was coming from.

“Is this the family farm?” I asked.

“You are only here because Xander and I rescued you.”

Non sequitur or narcissism? “And I was only on the beach because you told me I had to shoot a man for no good reason.” Okay, and maybe because I was escaping.

“Mario is shit.”

“Because our family smells like flowers? Right.”

“You lost a chance to have people respect you on that beach. It was a good opportunity.”

“Does Grandma even know what happened?”

He smiled. “Who do you think Aldo appealed to? He could not go to the Sicilian Mafia or the Camorra, so he outsourced. Baboulas handed down the order for you to shoot Mario. She wants to gauge how much of her is in you, to test your mettle.”

All that iron in my body suddenly became useful; I knew there was a reason I popped supplements, when I remembered. I pulled my shoulders back and put every ounce of that iron into my eyes. “I am not my grandmother,” I said. “And I don’t intend to be her. I stink at being a meanie, for starters.”

After my cheerful reunion with my long lost-to-me uncle, I found myself in a serious snit. What I needed to untangle my thoughts and offload

some of this anger was a drive. My Beetle was in the compound's massive garage, freshly detailed and waiting for me to show up.

I loaded Yiorgos the eagle into the passenger seat, restrained temporarily in a cat carrier one of my cousins had scrounged up.

"Wait for me!"

I looked up to see Marika hurrying across the compound, children nipping at her heels. "Go away," she hollered at them. "Mama has to work!"

They broke away at the fountain, splintering off in different directions, presumably to wreck havoc on the world. This probably came close to how the Titan Cronus saw his unruly offspring.

"Did you tell Takis yet?"

"Tell him what?" Marika yanked the Beetle's door open and reared back when she caught sight of the cat carrier. "What is this?"

"Papou's eagle."

She burst into tears. Fat, wet beads rolled down her chin. I went diving into my bag, pulled out a travel pack of tissues. As she sobbed, I dabbed her eyes, but it was the Amazon river up in there, and these tissues were made for toddler-sized leaks.

"I cannot believe you have replaced me with an eagle," Marika wailed. "An eagle! It cannot even use a gun." She fixed her damp gaze to my face. "Can it? Because if you had an eagle that could use a gun, we could make a lot of money."

"I haven't replaced you. I'm just taking him to see an expert."

Or at least somebody I hoped was an expert. Even if the pet store guy only knew about parrots and finches that was more than I knew, and certainly more than Papou knew. Papou was a man who flung mice at people and told the eagle to fetch, so the bar was scraping rock bottom.

"You haven't?"

"No."

"So can I come with you?"

"If you want to."

"It is not that I want to," she said, tears miraculously drying up, "but being your bodyguard is my job. How else will I send my boys to college?"

"They want to go to college?"

"No, they want to join the circus."

That sounded about right. Little Tomas and his brothers were fans of the circus, too. Or was it the jungle? Something with animals and knife throwing, I remembered that much.

Marika stared at me.

"What?" I asked her.

"Are you going to move the bird?"

“Can you put the cage on your lap?”

“What if it bites me? Put it in the back.”

I glanced back. It wasn't a space problem holding me back, it was empathy. The poor bird was this close to a nervous breakdown as it was. The backseat could easily toss him over the edge.

“Can't you sit in the back?”

The waterworks flared up again, and Marika wasn't one of those pretty criers. We're talking red, blotchy face, puffy eyes, a ski slope of glistening snot.

Basically she was me.

“You *have* replaced me,” she wailed.

My cousins working in the garage ignored us. It was obvious they didn't want to be called on for comforting purposes—or worse, listening to Takis' wife talk it out.

Jeez. I grabbed the cat carrier and set it on the backseat, then I changed my mind and wedged it on the floor between the seats and threw a towel over the top in case there was something to what Takis had told me. Maybe the bird would feel safer in a moving vehicle if there was a towel over his head.

“There. Better?”

The tears stopped again. “I suppose so.”

“Are you okay?”

She sat in the passenger seat. The Beetle listed slightly. “I do not know what is wrong with me. I keep crying over the stupidest things. Replace me with a bird? Ha. That would never happen. Not only am I your bodyguard but we are also friends.”

Speaking of bodyguards, Elias was buckling up behind us in a sporty black coupe. It was small, fast, and nimble enough to jump a curb if necessary. Good thing Grandma wasn't a James Bond fan or she'd equip all our vehicles with rocket launchers and bulletproof glass.

“Marika, about that test ...”

“What test?” She looked startled. “Do the boys have a test today?”

“The pregnancy test.”

“Oh,” she said in a small, very unMarika-like voice. “That test. I do not want to talk about it.”

“Have you told Takis?”

“Takis who? Takis is dead to me right now. Hurry up—that bird does not sound too happy back there.”

Takis must have told her about the strip club. I fired up the Beetle, and soon I was waving goodbye to the guard at the front gates in his security booth. All traffic in and out of the compound came through or past the booth. Mail was checked—not read, but tested for explosives and metal—and nobody came through unless they were family, allies,

or invited.

Fifteen minutes later we were cruising along the Volos street, hunting for the exotic pet store I knew was along here somewhere.

Thirty minutes after I spotted it we were cruising around the block, searching for a parking space that didn't require parallel parking. There was no such animal, apparently, so Marika was forced to suffer through another ten minutes of me backing up, angling in, cursing loudly, and pulling out.

"I am going to die of old age," she muttered. "I could already be a grandmother and I would not know it because I am trapped here. What year is it?"

"Here's an idea. Why don't you do it?"

"Do not get crazy on me. Look, there is a *zaxaroplasteio* over there. I am going to get a little snack while you park. Do you want anything?"

"I could go for one of those chocolaty cake things wrapped in plastic."

"You mean a chocolate cake?"

"That's the one."

Now that I no longer had an audience (unless the cluster of laughing Romani across the street counted), I managed to park the Beetle. So what if I was a foot away from the curb and had my doubts whether I could get back out again.

Elias zipped into a space several car lengths back. He came around to the passenger side and whistled low. "Wow."

I winced. "Wow good or wow bad?"

"You don't want to know."

He was right—I didn't. "You could have helped."

"I could have but I was busy recording."

"What?" I yelped.

"Takis made me do it. I have to record all the funny things you do."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I just do as I'm told."

"And if I tell you to not to do it and delete what you've got?"

"Would you put snakes in my bed and *kaka* in my food?"

"No."

"Takis would," he said sadly.

He had a point. "But I'm your boss, damn it."

"Technically Baboulas is my boss. She pays me. But I am grateful to you, and loyal, except when Takis threatens to put *kaka* in my food. There is no telling where he would get it, you understand ..."

Puffing out little clumps of curse words strung together in biologically and physically impossible ways, I snatched up the cat

carrier and stormed into the pet store. In the reflection I saw Elias look both ways then park himself outside the shop door.

“Look at this,” Marika said, squeezing past him to join me. She opened a white paper bag. “Little mice made of marzipan. I would trade my children for marzipan. They do not know how lucky they are I had money.”

I reached for the paper bag. Marika yanked it away.

“Not even one?”

“Not even a sniff,” Marika said. “These are my marzipan mice.”

The exotic pet store wasn’t what I’d expected. The word exotic implied certain things, made certain promises. Island paradises. Weird and wonderful doohickeys. Tall, dark, handsome strangers. A little guy yelling about zee plane.

The shop had nothing of those things. What it did have were an overabundance of glass-front enclosures where things slithered and crawled. Greece’s idea of exotic and my idea of exotic was not the same thing.

We marched up to the counter, where somebody’s kid was manning the counter. He was facedown in a comic I didn’t recognize. From the way his jaw twitched periodically he had a mouthful of gum. When he ignored the usual polite greetings, I cleared my throat.

He took his sweet-ass time ripping himself away from the comic to shoot eye lasers at me.

Huh. What do you know—the kid wasn’t a kid. He was somewhere around the three decade mark. Dark red hair—auburn, I guess you’d call it—brown eyes like someone’s new puppy.

D’awww, he was adorable.

“What?” he snarled.

Maybe not so adorable. I held up the cat carrier. “I’ve got an eagle.”

“So?”

“It’s not really doing what eagles are supposed to do. Is there someone here who can help?”

“What’s an eagle supposed to do?”

I peered past him. “Is your bird guy here?”

“A snake ate him.”

Marika and I stared at him. “Really?” she asked. “A snake can do that?”

“Big snake.”

My eyes narrowed. “I don’t believe you.”

“Hey, believe what you want. A snake ate him or it didn’t.” He went back to his comic book.

I dumped the cat carrier on the counter, covering his precious reading material. He made an indignant little noise.

“Comics are for kids,” I said.

“He looks like a kid,” Marika said. “Look at his little hands. I bet he has tiny feet, too. Can we look at your feet, little man?”

He looked her up and down. “Cool whale. Better get it back to the water fast.”

Marika surged. “Why, you little—”

He vanished for a moment, then came hurtling around the counter. Behind the counter he was a small guy—maybe five-one or five-two. He must have been standing on a stool back there, because he’d shrunk to the size of a preschooler. He slammed his foot down on the top of Marika’s foot then disappeared behind the counter again. When I blinked he was five-two again, and trying to retrieve his comic from under the cat carrier.

Marika hopped around, hand wrapped around her foot. “I forgot to bring my guns,” she said, “but I will not forget when we come back later.”

“Hey,” I said to the little guy behind the counter. “You in the Baby Reeboks. Be nice. We’re paying customers.”

He looked up again. “You want some of what I just gave your friend? Because there’s plenty more where that came from.”

“Where are my mice?” Marika said suddenly. She upended the empty paper bag.

I looked around. No sign of the mice. Not even an almond crumble.

“Hmm ...” she said, “maybe I ate them. I need more.” She trotted out of the store, leaving me with Grumpy.

“Come on.” I nudged the cage. “Have a heart. I’ve got an eagle here that needs help.”

He sighed like I was busting his balls. “Lady, I don’t do eagles. Look around, what do you see? I’ll tell you. Reptiles. Amphibians. Exotic pets. A lot of my stock I don’t keep here because ...” His eyes went shifty. “Because reasons, that’s why. But what I don’t do are birds of prey.”

“Why not? Eagles are exotic.”

“They bite.”

“And—” I looked at his stock and gulped “—snakes don’t? Just look, okay?”

“Fine. *Gamo ton Christos*. If that will get you out of here, show me.”

Sheesh, someone was touchy. I yanked the blanket off the cage. He peered at the bird, crossed himself, then vanished.

I looked over the counter. “Are you okay?”

“I fell off the stool. Sometimes that happens. Now take that bird and go.”

“Wait—why?”

“I know that bird and I know who it belongs to.”

"You know Papou?"

"Papou? Woman, I don't know who your grandfather is but that eagle isn't his."

"As of a couple of weeks ago it is. It was an inheritance, of sorts."

He was silent as he hoisted himself back onto the stool and dusted himself off. "The Eagle is dead?"

"Crazy psychopath? About this tall?" I held my hand up. "Name of Periphas Dogas? Not dead—just back in prison. Do you know him?"

"Nope. Never heard of him. In prison, you say? That won't last long. Then he'll be coming back for his bird."

Luckily it didn't take a genius to see he was full of crap. He knew Periphas Dogas. I didn't know how—and really it didn't matter, as long as he helped with the bird.

"So can you do anything for the eagle?"

"What eagle? I don't see any eagle."

"If you know Periphas Dogas, then maybe you've heard of Katerina Makri."

"Everybody has heard of Katerina Makri."

"I'm her granddaughter."

He turned pale. "Are you going to kill me?"

"I haven't killed anyone yet."

"I'm very attached to my arms and legs."

"Then help me with the eagle."

We stared each other down.

"Please," I said.

He eyed the cat carrier. "What's the problem?"

I sketched out the facts as I knew them. He winced when I told him about Papou and his recently acquired mouse-tossing hobby.

"*Vlamos!*"

He was right; Papou was kind of an idiot when it came to the eagle.

"It's a bird of prey, not a dog," he went on. "No eagle wants to have his dinner thrown on the ground. It's undignified. An eagle wants to hunt. Tell him to take bird out into the woods and let it pick out its own rabbit. It'll be fine."

"Papou is kind of in a wheelchair. I think his days in the woods are over."

He threw the blanket back over the cage. "Then you do it."

"Did he help?" Marika was back with a fresh bag of marzipan mice. Like its predecessor, she tucked it into her shoulder bag. I pictured her sitting on the floor of her closet shoveling marzipan mice into her mouth while she hid from her sons.

"Kind of not."

"Maybe he's worried the eagle will take him away. I saw a video

on the internet of an eagle swooping down and carrying away a small child. Snatched him right off the ground, and ... whoosh!"

"Don't you have a planet to eat?" he said to her. Clearly he had a death wish.

She poked around in her bag. "No, but I have these little mice ..." Her voice trailed off. "I know I put them in here. Did anyone see me eat them?"

I shook my head. "No."

"I try to avoid mealtime at the aquarium," the shrimp said.

Marika shot him in the face with a steel look. "You—I am going to shoot you. But you will have to wait. Something is taking my marzipan mice. Now that I think about it, I know I did not eat them. My mouth does not taste like sugar. She looked around. "A lot of snakes in here," she said. "And other creepy things."

"Exotic pets," the little guy said.

Marika opened her bag again and stuck her hands inside. "You say exotic, I say—MY VIRGIN MARY'S KOLOS!" Surprisingly spry for a big, comfortable woman, Marika leaped two feet off the ground and ran for the door. In the same moment, Elias barreled through the open doorway, gun drawn. They collided. Elias squeezed out two shots. Glass shattered.

"My shop!" The little guy grabbed his head. "*Tis mana's sou mouni!* What is wrong with you people?"

"Snake," Marika muttered, shuddering. "Snake."

"Snake," I said helpfully. "Wait—where?"

Elias and Marika tried to untangle themselves, but that just made the situation worse. The leather strap of Marika's bag was wrapped around their ankles.

For a moment they didn't move.

The bag did.

I shrieked and leaped up onto the counter next to the cat carrier. "Snake!"

Tiny cast a rueful glance at the bag. "There shouldn't be any snakes out."

"Well, apparently there are."

He trotted over to the bag on his little legs—no baby Reeboks, just tiny Converse—and reached for the strap.

Marika's hand shot out and yanked his ankle. "Stop, thief!"

"I'm looking for my snake, you crazy elephant!"

"My Virgin Mary, I am going to kill him if the snake does not kill me first."

Untangled at last, Elias jumped up off the floor. He grabbed the bag and shoved it at the little guy, who—much to everyone's horror—thrust his hand inside.

“It’s okay,” the itty-bitty pet guy said, “she’s not venomous. OUCH!”

Blood drained out of my face. Marika shrieked.

The little guy laughed out loud. “I was kidding. You should see your faces. You’re all ...” He made a horrified face then cracked up again. “Aww, it’s just a little snake. Come to to *Baba*.”

Little snake my left foot. It was as thick as my wrist and as long as my arm. And I could tell from the sizable bump in its throat exactly where Marika’s marzipan mice had vanished to.

“Tell me that thing did not eat my marzipan mice,” Marika said through gritted teeth.

“Are you trying to make her sick?” the little guy demanded. “You average-height people are stupid. They put a *zaxaroplasteio* in next door knowing I had a shop full of exotic animals, can you believe it? Now they complain whenever Aliki here gets into their shop and eats the sweets. She always goes for the mice, but she’ll eat anything else with sugar after she’s sucked those down. You should see her trying to eat a black forest cake whole.”

I pictured that and gulped. “Can’t you keep it locked up?”

“Her, not it. You people stink. Everyone is so prejudiced against ophidian Greeks.”

“Ophidian?” The days where I tripped over a Greek word I didn’t know were becoming fewer and fewer, but this was a new one.

“Ophidians. Snakes. Aliki loves sugar, but it clogs her bowels. You don’t want to be around after a snake has had a laxative.”

We stared at him in horror.

Aliki’s jaw unhinged, mouth stretching to an alarming width. “Heh,” the little man said, “she is trying to give me kisses.”

Was he crazy? That snake could easily devour a person—particularly a little person.

I grabbed Marika and Elias. We inched towards the door.

“Hey, you gonna pay for all the damage?”

“Send me the bill,” I said.

“If you are really Baboulas’s granddaughter, forget it. She will stuff me in a barrel and roll me out to sea.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Just bill Katerina Makris—with an S—and I’ll take care of it.”

“You don’t look like a man, but what do I know. People these days, you just can’t tell if they’re freaks or not.”

“Aren’t you in no position at all to judge people?” I asked.

He folded his arms. “What are you talking about?”

“She is saying you are a *nanos*,” Marika said.

“Did you just call me a *nanos*? That’s derogatory. You’re a bad person.”

Nanos—Greek for midget.

“I will take it up with God on Sunday,” Marika said. “He can judge.”

The little guy lowered his sugar-eating snake back into its glass enclosure and fastened the lid. Then he climbed up on the stool and reached for the cat carrier’s handle. He wasn’t even close. He jumped once. Twice. Three times. Then he gave up with an exasperated sigh. No lie, I was really glad Takis and Stavros weren’t here, otherwise this guy would be on YouTube.

“One of you giants want to help me out here?”

Elias and Marika didn’t exactly leap to help him, so I sighed and hoisted the cage off the counter. Inside, Yiorgos let out an indignant squawk.

“You have to go. You can’t be here,” the little guy said. “Take your bird and get out.”

“Do you sell any eagle vitamins or anything I can give him if the hunting thing doesn’t work out?” I asked.

“My advice: let the bird go. Now get out. I don’t want your family to kill me.”

“Why would they kill you?”

“If they don’t kill me they’ll get me killed. I know what you people are.”

“Now who is prejudiced, eh?” Marika demanded.

I grabbed her arm, steered her out of the pet store, not stopping until she was buckled comfortably in the Beetle’s passenger seat. When I was sure she wasn’t going to launch herself back into the store, I stomped over to where Elias was fiddling with his phone.

I took a peek at the screen. “What is that?”

He held up the phone and showed me. “The *nanos* was too funny, so I recorded him. Now I’m sending it to Stavros and Takis for their YouTube channel.”

“They have a channel?”

“Sure.”

“What do they put on it?”

He looked somewhere beyond my left ear, face flushed. “Things. Funny things.”

Oh, hell no.

SOME PEOPLE ARE SHEEP. Others are shepherders. Stavros was a sheep with a ring through his nose that Takis liked to pull as he barked orders. I could have gone to Stavros, pled my case, asked him to take down the YouTube channel. Stavros and I were cool. But Takis? That little shit-weasel would twist Stavros's arm, and the channel would be back online in no time.

I fought weasel with weasel, cutting out the poor sucker in the middle.

I went to Grandma.

"Ha-ha-ha," she said when I walked into her hospital room. "I saw you on the Internet, standing on a chair, yelling about sex. I also saw you trying to park your car. Very funny. Who taught you to drive?"

"Your son," I told her. "Who taught him to drive? Was it you?"

"Maybe I did, maybe I didn't." Her eyes were darting about, all shifty.

"Michail could already drive by the time you gave him lessons," my uncle said from the corner of the room, where he was sifting through a stack of newspapers. I guess somebody didn't know about smartphones and the internet. "He stole a car and taught himself. He was a good driver. A very good driver. Not as good as me, but very good."

"Was?" I said, seizing on the tense issue. Dad wasn't past tense. Not to me. Not yet.

"I'm sure Michail is fine," Uncle Kostas said changing directions without a hitch. "He's a survivor. We are all survivors. It's what we do."

Grandma laughed harder. Someone was sucking down green-flecked cookies again. "He stole a car? That little *malakas*. I am going to make him eat wood when he comes home."

Eating wood isn't a sex thing. It's a spanking thing. And not a spanking sex thing either. It's punishment, often doled out with a wooden spoon. If anyone needed to eat wood it was Takis.

"Don't you think it's bad for family if Takis keeps posting these ... blooper reels?"

"It's good public relations," Uncle Kostas said. "Shows the family as human, like everybody else."

I was aghast. "You're organized crime! You want good public relations, the best thing you can do is quit the business and ... and ...

pretty much do anything other than what you've been doing!"

Uncle Kostas and Grandma laughed.

My eyes narrowed. "Have you been eating Grandma's happy cookies, too?"

"No, you are just very funny." He turned his attention to Grandma. "She's like her father."

"Funny?" I said.

"Funny, and always trying to convince us to quit the business. You don't walk away from the business," he said.

My gaze slid to Grandma, who was breaking a *koulouraki* into pieces on a paper napkin. She was watching my uncle, and if I had to guess I'd say her expression was thoughtful. Sometimes it's hard to tell when there are that many wrinkles involved. Old age is an excellent mask.

"Well I think it's bad for the family, if your goal is for other people in your, uh, business to take you seriously." I addressed Grandma. "What if Takis had recorded your little table dance and posted it on the internet?"

"He would not dare."

Probably she was right. Takis was a moron but he wasn't stupid.

"Kostas," Grandma said. "Get out."

His head performed a cartoon-worthy double take. "But, Mama—"

"There is the door, and I want you to use it. But only one way until I say you can come back in. Go."

I knew a beaten man when I saw one, and right now I wasn't seeing one. Uncle Kostas wasn't beaten; he was merely acting like someone who'd been on the wrong end of a whip. He bowed his head reverently and slouched toward the door. As he passed me, he winked. I wasn't his biggest fan but I almost smiled. Greece was a country that produced charming bastards by the bushel.

He shut the door behind him, leaving me alone with Grandma.

"I want you to do something for me," she said. "Rita can go with you."

"Okay ..." I squinted at her. "Do I have to kill anyone?"

"That's what Elias is for—and Rita, if necessary. I do not want you to kill anyone, okay? Not unless it is self defense."

"Then why did you give the order for me to kill Mario Fontana in Italy?"

"Order? What order? There was no order."

It's not easy throwing a grown man to the wolves. A grown man is heavy, for starters. But I managed.

I filled Grandma in what Uncle Kostas had told me, his little sob story about Grandma and her concern about how I wasn't tough enough to fill her tattered slippers. I left the tattered part out in case

Grandma was sensitive about her footwear.

"There was no order from me," Grandma said.

"But—"

"I gave no order. There is a reason I gave you your father's slingshot instead of a gun."

"What reason?"

"Let an old woman keep some secrets for now, eh? Today I want you to visit a woman named Dora Makri. She is family, but not Family. She will read your coffee cup for you."

"You want me to see ...?" My eyelids went on a blinking spree as I tried to process what she was telling me. "... a fortune teller?"

I'd been there, done that, with Melas's mother. Repeating the experience wasn't anything I wanted to do anytime soon.

"Maybe."

"Is this the one who made the phone cover?"

She patted my hand. "Make sure you take twenty euro with you."

I could see the future already. Me and my money would soon be foolishly parted.

A horn sounded behind me.

Marika was nodding sagely as I recounted Grandma's order to visit the non-criminal branch of the family tree.

"Dora is the one who told me I would marry Takis. Whatever she tells you ... guaranteed it is true."

"What else did she tell you?"

"Who can remember? It was a long time ago. Probably I should come with you—for support, in case she tells you something terrible."

"She did tell you about Takis," I said. Marriage to Takis was about as terrible as it got—in my mind, anyway.

"Maybe she can tell you who you will marry—Detective Melas or Xander."

My mouth dropped open. Below my hairline my forehead did something equally unflattering. "What makes you think I'd want either of them?"

Marika beamed at me from the passenger side. "I bet it will be Melas ... although, that could be very complicated. So you should probably choose Xander."

"I don't want to marry either of them!"

She made a dismissive noise.

My Spidey senses tingled. "Marika ... Is someone betting on this?"

Her face said yes but also no. Her mouth said, "Could be."

"Does Takis have anything to do with it?"

“Do not tell him I told you, okay? He could make a lot of money on this.”

My teeth ground in tight circles. A steel band fastened itself around my forehead and squeezed the delicate contents. “Who does he think I’ll choose?”

“He is betting on the detective.”

“Do Melas and Xander know about this?”

Recently my cousins had been making bets about when I’d sleep with Melas. So far nobody had collected a cent. If it ever happened I’d take it to my grave so none of them would make a dime off my sex life.

“Xander knows everything.”

“And Melas?”

“He is the police.”

So that was a yes. Or was it a no?

Things happened as I banged my forehead on the steering wheel. Insults shot me in the back. Urgent honking suggested that if I didn’t move, sometime very soon someone would move me—hard and from behind. I tapped the gas pedal before things—meaning the Beetle’s rear bumper—got ugly.

“Fortune tellers,” I muttered. “Coffee cups.”

I carried the bird back to Papou and passed on the little guy’s instructions to take Yiorgos into the woods and let him hunt.

“Oh, okay, I will get right on it,” Papou said. “Should be very easy in this wheelchair.”

“If at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.”

“*Gamo ti putana mou*, what kind of *skata* is that?”

I didn’t think he had a prostitute handy to do those things they do. “Don’t look at me, I didn’t make it up.”

“If you try and it does not work, try something else.” He tapped his temple with his finger. “That is wisdom. Not this try, try again *skata*.” He stuck his finger through the cat carrier bars. “Who is a good boy, eh? You want a little mouse? How about a little *klasimo*? Ask Katerina, she will do one for you.”

This was what my life had become: fart jokes and people who were trying to either kill me or make me kill people.

“You could take Yiorgos hunting,” Papou said slyly.

“No.”

“What is this ‘no’ nonsense?”

“‘No’ is a complete sentence,” I told him. “I’m not taking the eagle hunting.”

“Tonight then,” he said. “Meet you at the fountain at ten. If you are late I will fill your room with snakes. They might be poisonous. Or they might not.”

“Snakes are venomous, not poisonous.”

“In America maybe,” he said darkly.

Throw a stone along the waterfront in Greece and you’re liable to strike a place that sells coffee. Throw it hard enough and you’ll hit the guy selling it, too.

I eyed the rows of umbrellas stretched out across the concrete lip that ran alongside the gulf. People were hiding from the sun under the umbrellas, but the sun knew they were there. It was just waiting for them to screw up and stick out a limb, then ... ZAP. Tourists from predominantly pale regions, like the UK and Germany, came to Greece for the exfoliation benefits of first-degree burns.

Locals were smarter and more jaded. They were sleeping off the heat.

Mostly smarter, that is. Two dummies—Aunt Rita and me—were cruising the waterfront in Aunt Rita’s Barbie car, hunting for an oracle.

“Which *kafeneio* is she at?” I asked.

“The one with the blue umbrellas.”

I blinked. Every last cafe, taverna, and restaurant along this piece of the shore had a blue umbrella. When I pointed this out, Aunt Rita took both her hands off the wheel to hug me. The convertible kept on moving.

“To you they are blue. To me, a connoisseur of color, they are light blue, azure, navy blue, blue, robin’s egg blue, cornflower blue, cerulean, and periwinkle. Thea Dora will be under the red one.”

Dora wasn’t technically Aunt Rita’s aunt, but she tacked on the honorary *Thea* anyway, out of respect. Greeks are big on showing respect even to people who don’t deserve it, because it makes them look good. Behind the curtain it’s a different story. Back there it’s a character assassination in constant progress.

For a moment I thought Aunt Rita was pulling my leg, then I spotted the lone red canopy in the shades-of-blue canvas sea.

Aunt Rita parked the Barbie car within spitting distance of the sidewalk. With her long legs, fire-engine-red strapless dress and flaming red wig, she resembled the *Towering Inferno* as she strode across the street. Heads turned the way they always did for train wrecks and other unnatural disasters. Me, I thought my aunt was fierce. She was a lioness amongst declawed, toothless house cats. She

rocked being a woman so hard that, despite her prominent Adam's apple, it was hard to believe she'd started life as a boy.

When she realized I was still standing by the sugary pink convertible, waiting for a break in traffic, she stepped into the street and held up both hands, parting the steel sea for me. Brakes screeched. Horns blared. Aunt Rita soothed the beasts with a raised middle digit on each hand.

Very Gandalf of her.

Like Gandalf she had a staff. Unlike Gandalf, she kept hers tucked up and away.

Somehow I reached the other side without winding up as a crimson-and-bone smear on hot blacktop. My aunt grabbed my hand, dragged me over to the red umbrella.

Beneath it sat our oracle.

Dora Makris was an overstuffed sweating poodle with deep-set eyes and a fast mouth. She dressed in a widow's black and looked like she could strip a person of their darkest secrets in ten seconds flat.

Aunt Rita performed the introduction ritual. Perfume-heavy cheek kisses were exchanged. Damp hugs happened. And when the polite ceremony was over, Dora Makri declared, in the way of southern belles and Greek women of a certain age, "You are American! My niece is American. Maybe you know each other." She beamed at me, clearly pleased at herself for coming up with that bit of wisdom.

"Uh, where is your niece from?"

"Oregon!"

Huh. What were the odds? I bet Stavros and Takis knew. "Whereabouts in Oregon?"

She thought for a moment. "It begins with a P ..."

"Portland?"

"Portland!"

Maybe I did know her. "What's her name?"

"Vivi Tyler. Do you know her?"

"No, sorry."

Her face fell.

Aunt Rita stepped in. "You do realize your American niece is our family too, eh?"

"As if I could forget," Dora Makri said, her face broadcasting that she'd forgotten. "What does the shady part of my late husband's family need today?"

Aunt Rita rolled her eyes at me. "Shady? This from a woman whose daughter is on a reality TV show."

"It is the best show on television," Dora Makri said, words dripping conviction.

"Grandma watches it," I said.

Kyria Dora beamed. “See? Me, I never watch it. Too much violence.”

Aunt Rita pulled out a seat for me then one for herself. We sat.

“Mama wants Katerina to have her cup read.”

Kyria Dora eyed Aunt Rita suspiciously. “Since when does your mama trust anyone besides that other woman to read cups for her?”

“There’s a ... complication,” my aunt said delicately.

“A complication,” Kyria Dora breathed.

A bell went ding-dong in my head. Lights flashed in the darkness. “Are we talking about Kyria Mela?” I asked. “Because if we are, Kyria Mela thinks I want to sleep with her son.” I did and I didn’t. “Grandma probably doesn’t want her prejudice affecting the reading.” I didn’t mention Kyria Mela had already read my cup.

Dora immediately sniffed out the potential gossip. “Are you saying that woman does not like you? Why? Did you steal a chicken from her?” She patted my hand. “You can tell me—we are family.”

“Who wouldn’t love Katerina? Look at this face.” Aunt Rita grabbed my chin and turned me toward the light. “Look at it. This is the face of the sweetest angel I have ever met ... and also the future of the Makris family.”

Dora Makri crossed herself, forehead to chest, shoulder to shoulder. “Okay, okay.” She waved to some distant point across the street. A waiter materialized with a tray holding two coffees and two tall sweaty glasses of iced water. “I am better than that Mela woman anyway.”

Better at divining the future maybe, but definitely not better at yanking out fingernails.

Suddenly Dora Makri’s eyes widened. Her back stiffened as though a puppeteer had just shoved a steel rod up her rear. “What is she doing here?”

My head swiveled on its stick. My heart came to a screeching halt as my eyes sucked in the sight of Greece’s most fearsome creature not in mythology books sidling up to the table.

“Look who it is,” Kyria Mela said in a sticky sweet voice. “Someone who thinks she can divine the future.” She plucked the sign advertising Dora Makri’s business and rates off the table, peered down her nose at it. “And you make *money* lying to people? Oh well, even liars need to eat. And you do like to eat, don’t you?”

Dora heaved herself out of her chair. The chair made a grateful noise.

“Sit, sit,” Kyria Mela said, waving her hand. “I do not want you to lose a kilo.” She scanned the small table, zeroed in on me.

The fragment of my DNA that remembered scuttling around the forest floor back in the days when being trodden on by a dinosaur was

a distinct probability went, “Meep.”

Melas’s mother touched a finger to her eye, and then snatched a chair away from a baffled tourist sporting a fanny pack and Crocs. He was too burnt to fight back. “You want the truth about your future you should come back to me. I have the sight.”

Holy hell, I mouthed at Aunt Rita.

My aunt patted my knee, a move that would have been reassuring if her eyes weren’t glassy with deep-seated fear.

Kyria Mela has that effect on people. Physically, Melas’s mother is a tiny helmet-haired bird. She’s what men call fun-sized ... if they want to lose their heads and balls. One good stomp and you could crush the woman under your boot. But she oozed something that screamed, “You thought Medusa was bad-ass, turning men to stone? That was nothing. I can make you bleed from holes you did not know you had.”

“Don’t worry,” Kyria Mela said. “You have nothing to fear from the cup ...” She blew terror into my soul with a long, dark look. “ ... Unless you do.”

Oh. Gee. That made it okay then. Abracadabra—fear gone. Except ... now horror was tiptoeing down my spine, heading toward my bladder. The doll-sized demitasse cup in front of me looked like risky business now. A mouthful could make the difference between wetting myself and staying dry.

Dora Makri rolled her eyes and turned her back on Melas’s mother. “Drink the coffee,” she told me, “then turn it upside down on the saucer and turn it three times.”

“Seven,” Kyria Mela said.

“Three,” Dora insisted.

“What are you doing here?” Aunt Rita asked Kyria Mela, suddenly rediscovering what she had tucked up inside her underwear.

“I came to talk to Katerina about something very important.”

“I don’t really know important stuff,” I said.

“Italy. You were there.” Together we reenacted that scene from *Aliens 3*, where the alien is sniffing Ripley’s horrified, cowering face. For the record, I was playing the role of Ripley, but with hair. “I want to know everything.”

I shuddered. “I was there for three days, and mostly I was a prisoner.”

“Did they torture you?”

“Does a rare strain of poison ivy count?”

Her expression turned thoughtful, in an alarming way. “Maybe.”

Hands shaking, I snatched up the coffee. “We could split the difference and do five,” I suggested. Two sets of steel eyes glared back at me. “Or not ...” I looked at Aunt Rita.

"I can't help you," she said, inches away from curling into the fetal position, "I'm scared, too."

I turned back to the two wannabe oracles. "For the record, I still don't believe in this stuff."

"You will," Kyria Mela said darkly, "but only if you listen to me. That one is a false prophet."

"I used to work for the police." A smug little smile brightened the lower half of Kyria Dora's face. "And I heard stories about your son ... *po-po* ..."

Melas's mother sucked in her breath—hard. It was the dangerous sound I imagined the retreating tide might make before a tsunami slammed into the shore.

I perked up. "Stories? I want to hear the stories."

"There are no stories," Melas's mother said, tone sprinkled with broken bones.

"We will both read her cup," Kyria Dora said, "and we will see who is right."

"Yes, we will see."

"Prepare, you skinny bird."

"Prepare what, your coffin? Greece does not have enough wood."

"To lose."

"I never lose."

"You are about to."

As far as standoffs went, it was Mexican, but with Greek women.

"Wait a minute," I said. "You two want to use me to settle a score?"

Kyria Dora made a face. "You could say that."

Aunt Rita brightened up. She pulled out her phone. "Let me call the bookies. They will want to be in on this."

I gawked at her. This was a new level of crazy. Greece had lost its damn mind. Maybe it was the heat. Studies have shown that people are kookier in summer. That's how they explain Florida.

"No," I said. "No bookies." I knocked back the coffee, gagged on the grounds, slapped the cup on its saucer and spun it five times before thrusting it across the table at the two women. It was my non-violent way of clanging their heads together.

Two sets of hands reached for the cup. Kyria Dora elbowed Kyria Mela and snatched up her prize. She made a big production out of twisting it this way and that, contemplating my future.

"Ah ... I see him, this one's son. You will have many babies with him ... out of wedlock."

"Never," Kyria Mela breathed.

"The cup does not lie," Kyria Dora said archly.

"It is not the cup lying, it is your mouth."

Dora ignored her. “Your children will not be his first out of wedlock child. There is another.”

My heart stopped. My blood froze. But somehow I didn’t drop dead. “Huh,” I said, “how about that.”

“More lies,” Kyria Mela said airily. “Believe this one and you will believe anything. Have you thought about selling Amway? That would be a step up for you. You would be excellent at peddling bullshit.”

“Amway? I do not know this Amway. All I know is the truth I see here. Also—” the sausage-curved woman looked me in the eye “—there is somebody following you.”

I frowned. “You can see that in the cup?”

“No—he is over there.”

I whipped around just in time to catch a glimpse of a dark-haired man fleeing the scene. Beside me, Aunt Rita pulled a gun out of ... I don’t know where. Somewhere. The hiding places in that dress were nonexistent, but what did I know?

Across the street, Elias was in a pursuit that wasn’t quite happening, thanks to the freakin’ NIS. Hera and her flunkies had set up temporary shop across the street, clogging foot traffic on the sidewalk.

Hera cheered Elias on as he shoved her suits aside, bolting after the creep who’d been watching us.

“You can do it, loser,” Hera yelled, hands cupped around her mouth.

It was a short, dangerous jaunt across the street, but it was worth risking life and limb for a higher cause.

I kicked her in the shin. Hard.

“You stupid *skeela*,” she howled.

“Oops,” I said, totally at peace with being called a bitch. “My foot slipped. It does that a lot.”

Recovering quickly, her hand shot out and yanked on a skein of my hair. “So does my hand.”

“Police brutality!” I yelled.

“Good thing I am not the police then. If I was the police I couldn’t do this.” She whipped something out of her purse and shoved it up under my ribs. There was a zapping sound and then—

Chapter 15

WHEN I OPENED ONE EYE, Aunt Rita was staring down at me, her painted face worried. "What are you doing?"

My first—American—instinct was to pop off a 'What do you think I'm doing on the ground?' but Greeks use 'What are you doing?' as a substitute for 'How are you?' That's because they care more about what you're doing than how you feel about it. The gossip machine thrives on that thing you did that you hope no one ever finds out about.

"Taking an unscheduled nap."

She helped me up. "That *skeela*. Someone needs to punch her in the *mouni*."

"She'd probably enjoy that." I looked around. "What did I miss?"

"Whoever was watching you they got away. Elias tried, but then he cut through the line at the bus stop. Big mistake."

I winced. Boarding a bus was serious business—and seriously dangerous business—around these parts. Never get between an elderly Greek and bus doors. "Is he okay?"

"The spit is already dry, but the bruises will take a few days to fade. Do you know how much damage an old woman can do with a watermelon?"

"Katerina!" Elias limped towards us, looking like he'd been tossed into a dryer with a bucketful of rocks. "He got away. Do you think Baboulas will have me killed?"

"Probably just whipped," I said. His face fell. "I'm kidding." Maybe; with Grandma anything was possible. "You did the best you could. Did you get a good look at him?"

Breathing hard, he made a face. "Only the back of his head. He had dark hair and good clothes."

"Did he have a weapon?" my aunt asked.

"Not that I could see. He was just watching Katerina, I think."

Aunt Rita gnawed on that a moment. "Reporter?"

"Maybe."

Surely it wouldn't be Mario. Why would he care about little old me? I was an escapee hostage, that's all. Besides, after the toe incident I wasn't sure he'd be able to run.

Hands on hips, my aunt looked up and down the street. "Whoever he was, we scared him off—for now. But he will come back. Shit always floats back up to the surface, and when it does we will be there

with a net.”

As far as metaphors went it was disturbing, but I appreciated the part where there would be a waiting net.

Back on the table-and-umbrella lined side of the street again, I plopped down into the chair I’d left in a hurry. My grandfather’s cousin was fanning herself with her hand.

“Oooh-la-la, your life is so exciting,” she said. “I never met anybody who had a stalker before.”

My gaze smashed into Kyria Mela’s heavy-lidded stare. Now there was a woman who knew the line between ‘stalker’ and ‘murderer’ was only about a fraction of an inch thick, and that line depended on the stability of the lies the stalker told him or herself.

Being almost constantly followed—by the NIS, assassins, weirdoes, and by other assassins and weirdoes who weren’t Family—was growing old. The only silver lining was that I’d learned something valuable about myself: becoming a cult leader wasn’t for me.

I reclaimed my cup from Dora Makri and pushed it to Kyria Mela, hoping for a more optimistic future—even if it was one made of bologna.

“Can you see something else in there?”

It didn’t take Melas’s mother long. “The cup says you need to grow a pair of balls.”

The cup was right—about the balls at least. Ever since I’d come to Greece the bad guys had danced all around me, taking (often literal) shots. The Family, especially Grandma, prodded me this way and that, trying to squeeze me in to an eventual leadership role.

What had I done about being proactive?

Not much.

Reacting instead of acting was my MO.

“You can have mine,” Aunt Rita said. “Mine are sitting here, taking up room in my lingerie.”

Balls. Aunt Rita was stuck on the subject after Kyria Mela made her declaration about my future. After that, the detective’s mother had clammed up and told me if I wanted to hear more then she expected an exchange: stories about Italy for another stab at my future. “Cheaper than what this one will charge you,” Kyria Mela had said, shooting an invisible arrow over Dora Makri’s bow.

My grandfather’s cousin had snatched the twenty-euro note out of my hand and stuffed it into her pocket. “What kind of monster charges family?” She bestowed a smile upon me. It was the innocent curve of one who flirted frequently with selective memory loss.

Now Aunt Rita and I were back at the compound and I still wasn't sure why Grandma had sent me to Dora Makri to begin with. When I mentioned it to Aunt Rita she shrugged. "Baboulas's ways are mysterious."

Mysteries were fast becoming my least favorite genre. Mysteries were helping nobody, least of all Dad.

I kissed my aunt on both cheeks, hopped into the Beetle, and zipped off toward the hospital, Elias sticking close behind. Two NIS vans clung to his metallic butt.

Hera still wanted to debrief me. I wasn't about to make it easy for her.

I called Stavros to complain. Stavros was good at listening to complaints.

"She's got no right," I said.

"Actually, the government says she does."

"But they shouldn't. Not after she dumped Marika and me in Italy. We were almost killed."

"Collateral damage," he said sadly. "That's all any of us are."

"It shouldn't be that way."

"This is the life that chose us."

Grandma had visitors. All I could see of them was a row of masculine backs. Three men clad in variations on the same theme: slacks, plain-colored business shirts rolled to the elbow, shoes clean but not mirror glassy.

The door was open, but an immovable force was blocking the way. Very Biblical. Very Xander.

"Can I go in?" I asked him.

Xander performed the little up-down chin move that Greeks use instead of a headshake. So that was a 'no' then.

How much luck did I have, and how far could I push it?

"Can I stand out here and wave to her?"

Grandma's best henchman and favorite bodyguard rolled his eyes. But wait, was that my imagination or did the edges of his lips twitch?

"Do you know why Grandma sent me to see my grandfather's fortune-telling cousin?"

Nothing. Not even a twitch this time. The situation was regressing.

"Hey—want to play charades? You go first."

A soft snort.

"Interpretive dance? I won't even judge you much. Can you dance?"

A guy that big, surely he couldn't. He walked like one of the big

cats, but dancing was a whole different set of skills.

"Blink if you know why Grandma sent me to see Dora Makri."

"You are looking for a mystery where there is none, Katerina," Grandma called out from inside her hospital room. Three heads turned my way. There was a moment of silence as they did basic math, then one of the men said, "Katerina! You grow more beautiful every time we see you. Any word from Mikey?"

Three men—three of Dad's best childhood friends. Once upon a time the group was six strong, but now they were down two members. Cookie had drowned in Grandma's pool, helped along by a serial killer. Tony Goats, former dentist, was erased on his wife's orders. Not a stable marriage, that one.

Now there were three ... and Dad, wherever he was. Jimmy Pants, the scrawny high school gym teacher; Fish, an accountant built like Santa Claus; and Johnny Deadly, mattress salesman. Dad was Mikey Far, on account of how our last name means a long, long way away.

I'd met them all before at Cookie's last funeral, before the family dogs discovered him floating in the pool, and again at Tony's gravesite. Now they were here, and I was getting a three-horsemen-of-the-apocalypse vibe.

"We're still looking," I said, sidestepping Xander.

Dad's old posse took a few moments to swap kisses and hugs with me before resuming their positions.

"Bad business," Fish said.

"Mikey will show up. That's what he does."

Jimmy Pants was right ... to a point. Dad's job, whatever its true nature, took him all over the world, apparently. But he'd always come home. Or he had until a couple of crooked noses marched him out of our home.

"What are you guys doing here?" I asked.

Johnny Deadly spoke for them all. "We're here to pay our respects."

"I like respect," Grandma said.

"Everybody likes respect," Uncle Kostas said, appearing in the doorway. "Throw some of it this way, would you?"

The men stared at him. Uncle Kostas stared back. They didn't look happy to see him, and the feeling seemed mutual.

Then, slowly, like an enemy submarine rising, my uncle grinned. "Look, it's the three *malakas*. You are missing a couple of balls, though."

"Cookie and Goats are dead," Fish said.

My uncle shook his head. "Nobody tells me anything these days."

"When did we ever tell you anything?" Johnny Deadly said.

Suddenly there was tension in the room, overpowering the stench

of the pine-scented cleaner that seems to exist in every medical facility in the world. The four men metaphorically pulled out their wieners and staged a measuring competition, all without unzipping, speaking, or moving a muscle.

Somewhere behind me metal whispered against fabric. Xander was getting his gun out—and his was definitely bigger.

While all this male posturing was going on, Grandma sat back against Aunt Rita's frothy nest of pillows, enjoying the play.

I threw something into the room to cut the tension. A kind of verbal knife.

"Someone is following me. You know, just for a change."

The tension fell away. A new kind of conflict filled its shoes. This one was sharp and it was pointed right at me.

"You should have opened with that," Grandma said.

"Relax, it's the NIS," Uncle Kostas said.

"It's not the NIS," I told him, "although they're following me, too."

"For what?" Grandma wanted to know.

I told her about Hera's itching, burning desire to drag the details of my impromptu trip to Naples out of my head. When I was done I said, "What should I do?"

"Nothing. Live your life. I will keep my eye on the NIS."

"And the person following me who isn't NIS?"

"That is what you have Elias for, but I will assign someone else to you as well."

"Do you mean Marika?"

Grandma snorted. "Marika."

Uncle Kostas laughed. "Marika is a joke."

Marika was the punch line to a joke as far as the bodyguard business went, but her heart was a barrel of hot chocolate. Whatever Uncle Kostas was made of, it wasn't candy. Mostly it smelled like pee.

"Not Marika," Grandma said. "Someone invisible. I will arrange it immediately."

I looked at her. She didn't move.

"The other kind of immediately," she elaborated. "After you leave. And after they leave." She was looking at Dad's old pals.

"Maybe you should stay in the compound," my uncle suggested. "Save the manpower. There is nothing you can't do there. The pool, the movie room, the gym ..."

Was he saying I needed to work out?

"There's a movie room?" I asked.

"Sure there's a movie room." Then he winked at me, and I knew he was talking about the super-secret room—well, rooms—directly beneath Grandma's dump. From beneath the compound, Grandma could keep eyes on places that were her property ... and some that

weren't. Detective Melas would poop a kitten-sized brick if he knew his police building was under constant Family surveillance.

"You know I'm an adult, right?" I said to my uncle.

He beamed. "To me you will always be my baby niece." His attention shifted, for which I was grateful. I didn't need him putting ideas in Grandma's head. Grandma's head was already home to plenty of bad ideas, including the blind date thing. The last thing I needed was to find myself confined to the compound again. I'd been there, done that, and captivity definitely didn't agree with me. So much so that I'd escaped to go hunting a serial killer.

"What do you do these days, Pants?" Uncle Kostas asked the high school gym teacher. When Jimmy Pants told him, Uncle Kostas laughed. "You almost had me there."

Jimmy Pants wasn't a laughing man. "No joke, *malaka*."

"You. In school. Ha! Back in the old days you six would do anything to get out of school."

"Things change," Jimmy Pants said.

My uncle swung around to waggle his eyebrows at me. "Not for your father, eh, Katerina? I bet school is the last place you would find the man, even now. Did he ever show up for those meetings American schools have with parents?"

Grandma glowered. "Kostas."

"What?" Two soft palms up. "We are just talking, that's all."

I thought about all the times Dad didn't show up for parent-teacher conferences. It wasn't that Dad didn't care, Mom told me. According to her, our family liked luxury items like food and electricity, so Dad had to work. These days I wondered whose kneecaps he'd been whacking while Mom discussed my note-passing prowess with my teachers.

"I don't believe you," I said to Grandma, returning to my original point. "I think you sent me to see Dora Makri for a reason. I don't know what reason, but there's definitely a reason."

Uncle Kostas laughed. "It's like she knows you, Mama."

"Everything in life does not have a reason." Grandma closed her eyes, then opened one hawkishly. She fixed it on me. "But since you are here, did you learn anything interesting?"

"Yeah, that Kyria Makri and Kyria Mela hate each other."

"If that is all you learned then it was a waste of time."

"And money," I said. "Don't forget money."

Grandma grinned, making her one healthy-sized wart away from "witch." "Money is one thing I never forget."

I felt uneasy. I felt uneasy all the way back to the parking lot with my uncle beside me.

"Sit back, Katerina. Let life happen to you. Or—" he dealt me a libertine's grin "you can choose to happen to life."

"Thanks, Mr. Miyagi," I said. "You know, you've never said what you're doing here—in Greece, I mean."

"Why does anyone come to Greece? For the sunshine."

"Germany doesn't have sunshine?"

"Everywhere has sunshine, but not like sunshine at home. Greece's sunshine is different."

"It's the same sun."

He shrugged. Looked up and down the parking lot. "So they say. Look, Katerina, whatever Mama said up there, forget it. Stay at the compound. The compound is safe."

"One of Winkler's brats tried to kill me there. One of Winkler's other kids tried to blow herself up there. A serial killer murdered one of Dad's old friends there. Which is the safe part again?"

"Okay, the compound is mostly safe. What I'm saying is that it's safer in there than out here."

"Grandma and I have been over this."

"Mama is an old woman. She is reaching an age where she is not thinking clearly. Her mind is deteriorating, and her health. In her prime, there was no way she would have allowed you to go traipsing around Greece with the NIS and God knows who else for company. She would have locked you away until it was safe, and she would not have yielded for anything."

"Hello," I said. "American citizen here. Adult. My country would make a frowny face at that sort of treatment."

"Maybe. Or maybe not." The way he said it was annoyingly mysterious. My uncle was yet another person incapable of saying exactly what they meant.

"Leaving now," I said, stepping off the ramp.

"You can never leave. You can run away, fly back to America, but leave? Greece never leaves you. Now that it has you, the Family will never let you go."

"Can I check out?"

"What?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. Just an old song."

I could check out, but leaving? Nope. That sounded about right.

Greece and my family were Hotel California.

Someone was watching me. I knew this because the watcher was

standing in the compound's shadows, in a puddle of dogs.

"Help," Donk said. "They want to kill me."

"Sure looks like it." Death by drowning, maybe. Good thing Donk and the dogs weren't in an enclosed space or he'd be up to his knees in drool.

"Get them off me!"

"You don't like dogs?"

Nearby, a rash of laughter broke out. Takis and Stavros were at a nearby table, sucking down *frappes*, cellphones aimed at the flailing Donk.

I stomped over, snatched away their phones.

"Hey!" Takis said. "What is your problem? Is it that time of the month?"

When it came to Takis I lived in the PMS zone. "I know what you're doing. The YouTube channel ends now."

"What YouTube channel?" he wanted to know.

"Grandma knows," I said. "Grandma *knows*."

"You told Baboulas? *Gamo tin mana sou*, what is wrong with you?"

"You are what's wrong with me." I paused. Thought about it. "One of the things, anyway. No more Youtube."

"Vine?"

"Vine is for losers," I said.

Donk snickered. "He looks like a loser."

Takis bared his teeth. He pitched his straw at Baby Dimitri's nephew. "Say it again, I can have you killed."

"You could do it yourself," Stavros reminded him.

"Or I could do it myself."

"You can't do that," Donk protested. "Don't you know who I am?"

The Makris men nudged each other using their elbows. "Why else would we want to kill you?" Takis said.

With a shake of his legs, Donk untangled himself from the overzealous canines. My goat was there, too, chewing on the band of the teenager's underwear. That's what he got for wearing saggy pants.

Intervention time.

I clicked my fingers and hoped the goat understood. After a quick, friendly head-butt, it redirected its attention and mouth to a purple cluster of grapes dangling from a vine.

"My uncle will kill you back," Donk said.

"He could try," Takis said.

"Enough," I said. "Donk, what are you doing here?"

Still fixated on Takis and Stavros, he scowled. "Looking at garbage."

My cousin's cousin's cousin held up a finger. "Keep it up, I will throw you in the dungeon."

“Takis,” Stavros said, the warning clear in his voice.

Several feet away, Donk’s eyes lit up. “You have a real dungeon? Can I see it?”

A creep crawly sensation of dread clambered up my spine, one tufted foot at a time. Donk was awfully interested in the idea of a dungeon, and here was Takis blabbing like everyone knew Grandma had a dungeon. Okay, so the accommodations were plush, and they had board games and books, but a dungeon is a dungeon is a dungeon.

“That’s what Takis calls his living room,” I said. “You really want to hang out with his kids?”

“They’re not so bad,” Donk said. He didn’t sound convinced, but I wasn’t sure if he didn’t buy my dungeon story or his own estimation of Takis and Marika’s sons.

“Want to go for a drive?” I asked him. “Maybe get an ice cream.”

He shrugged. “I like ice cream.”

“Everybody likes ice cream, *malaka*,” Takis said.

I folded my arms, looked him in the eye—hard. “You want to *bet* on that? Because I heard you like making bets.”

He grinned like a guy who’d just been found out and didn’t mind too much. “Which bet did you hear about, eh?”

“I think you know,” I said.

“You want to do me a favor, sleep with all of them, and I will be a rich man.”

“All of them who?” I yelped.

His face shuttered. “Uh, never mind. I thought you said you knew.”

“Ugh!” I grabbed Donk by the back of his tank top (Nike) and pushed him toward the archway. “What flavor do you want, kiddo? Because I’m thinking about death-by-chocolate. I need death-by-chocolate. And if I don’t get death-by-chocolate, then it’ll be death-by-Katerina for Takis.”

Donk shot me a worried look. “Is it that time of the month?”

After ice cream there was napping. I embraced the siesta. Embraced it all the way to almost midnight. I cast aside the thin cotton sheet, shimmied into a bikini, then threw a dress over the two-piece because I wasn’t one hundred percent committed to swimming. I had a short history of sitting on the edge, swishing my legs into the ripples of water and light while I put all my energy into thinking.

The pool wasn’t empty. Xander was there, doing his nightly laps.

I stood there like a big dummy, wiggling my toes in my flip-flops, watching him slice through the chlorinated water like he was part fish. Nothing got in his way, it seemed like, not even physics.

Xander. Friend or foe? Family guy or sleeper agent?

The allegedly fake NIS identification he carried around bothered me. A lot.

Rubber soles slapped my feet. I crouched at the end of the pool and watched one lap bleed smoothly into the next. Lies wiggled through my head provocatively, each one more ludicrous than the last. I wasn't really ogling Grandma's bodyguard. I could quit if I wanted to. I could quit right now.

Or right now.

That damp stuff around my mouth? Not drool. Nope, not at all.

Eventually, Xander stopped, bobbing in place. He gave me a look that said, "Were you staring at me?" and I gave him a look back that said, "Dream on, dude," and he lobbed one back that said, "You know you want this," and I rolled my eyes and said out loud, "Get out of the pool, Xander. We need to talk." Then, because my parents didn't raise me to be a jerk, I tacked on a decorative "Please?"

The courtyard was dim but his skin glistened. He nodded once, then exited the pool.

It paid to be nice; literally, if you were a bill collector.

Now that I had him out of the pool I wasn't sure what to do with him. Answering questions wasn't his thing. On the upside, neither was asking them. It felt good to hang out with somebody who wasn't full of questions or orders. If Xander wanted me to sit and stay, he made me sit and stay. There was no waffling, no shadowboxing. He was a man of actions and deeds.

With a towel in one hand, he regarded me thoughtfully.

My mouth tasted like I'd been sucking on a hot stone. "I guess I don't really have questions. Not for you, anyway. It would be pointless asking because you don't answer questions. Or talk." I folded my arms, forming a protective barrier between me and Grandma's world. "I don't know who to believe, who to trust. Uncle Kostas wants me to kill people. Grandma wants me to be her. Aunt Rita ... Aunt Rita thinks I'm fabulous. I'm not fabulous—I'm just me. Detective Melas wants to see me naked ..."

Xander's eyes flicked to all my vital erogenous zones before landing back on my face. Good thing it was mostly dark and he couldn't see the blush slopping all over my skin.

"And you," I went on, "I don't know what you want, unless it's for me to shut up and go away. You're flinging your towel over your shoulder and you're walking away. Oh, God, you definitely want me to shut up, don't you?" My eyes did the lost puppy routine and followed him.

Xander turned around and held up a finger.

It said, *Wait there.*

At least I think it did. All this dim lighting, it might have been a “Screw you, lady, you’re crazy” finger.

I scrounged up a chair and began waiting for what might potentially be the long haul.

It wasn’t long or a haul.

The earth had barely had a chance to lurch an inch closer to dawn when Xander reappeared carrying two small bowls. Two small bowls heaped with ice cream. He gave me one. I suppose it was okay that he kept the second for himself. That didn’t stop me eyeing it longingly as my spoon dipped closer to the bottom of my bowl.

“You brought ice cream,” I said, stating the obvious.

Xander nodded. He kept eating. He’d discarded the wet shorts for dry. That was all the energy he’d put into dressing. Not that I wasn’t grateful for the view—I was—but he made no effort to hide the cruel artwork on his back.

“I like ice cream,” I said. I didn’t mention the bucketful I’d sucked down earlier. Not death-by-chocolate, but close. It’d had fudgy chunks.

He ate his ice cream one agonizingly slow spoonful at a time. Meanwhile I was channeling a vacuum cleaner.

Suddenly Xander reached over and set his bowl on the table, slowly, silently. It was half full. My bowl held nothing but memories. He reached for my hand, pulled me to my feet. With the same amount of silence, he pressed a finger to his lips.

Oh. Now I got it. We were both supposed to be quiet. Things were afoot.

He pointed to Grandma’s shack, making a gesture like I was supposed to go back to my kennel like a good doggie.

Nope. Not happening. Xander had shared his ice cream, and now I was going to share my moral and physical support. Okay, maybe I was curious, too. He’d heard something I couldn’t hear, something that hadn’t caused a blip on the compound’s security radar. Not that I could tell, anyway.

He held me still. Pointed toward the far end of the compound, to where the wall met the orchard. Stealth mode engaged, he took off toward whatever his canine ears had picked up. Not wanting to be the one to screw up his mission, I lifted one foot then the other, slipped off my sandals. Barefoot, I snuck after Xander. Sneaking was easy for him. Me, not so much. But Greece was slowly honing the skill.

Before we reached the wall, Xander grabbed my hand. Less romantic. More leash-like. Things got more physical after that. He crouched low enough to boost me up to the wall’s flat top. Not two seconds passed before he joined me up there. We sat facing the orchard, legs swinging, watching the shadows.

Okay, my legs were swinging. Xander's legs didn't swing. Probably he was too cool to swing them. I wasn't too cool. I wasn't cool at all.

Xander pointed to his eyes with two fingers, then jabbed those same fingers at the trees. Totally unnecessary; now I could see what he'd heard. Someone out there was walking. Someone the size and shape of my prodigal uncle. No sneaking for Uncle Kostas. He ambled confidently between the trees, hands buried in his pockets, mouth puckered and whistling an unfamiliar tune.

What was he up to?

"Maybe he's going for an innocent, totally harmless walk," I whispered.

Xander raised his eyebrows. *Really?* they asked me. *Is that what you think?*

"How would I know? I just met the guy. Anyway, aren't you guys tight?"

He looked at me.

"Tight," I explained, squishing my hands together so he'd get the picture. "Close. Friends. Buddies. *Amigos*."

He looked at me some more.

"You rescued me together. You did an elaborate handshake thing. That's what guys do when they like each other. Women hug and go shopping. Men do handshakes."

His head swiveled back around so that he was watching my uncle, who appeared to be walking in wide circles.

"Is he waiting for somebody?"

Xander shrugged.

"What do you think he's doing? There has to be a reason we're sitting on this wall watching him."

Nothing.

"You don't share much, do you? Have you thought about therapy? It's not healthy to hold everything. Ten more years like this and you'll be a blithering idiot, probably with a wonky heart."

He nudged me with his elbow. It wasn't a caring and sharing poke. More like a, "Hey, he's on the move," thing. Sure enough, Uncle Kostas had quit walking in circles and was now headed toward us. Xander jumped, landing right way up on the inside of the wall. He hadn't made a sound. He lifted me down just as soundlessly.

My phone buzzed. Worst timing ever.

Before I could check the screen, Xander yanked me into a shadow just as Uncle Kostas vaulted over the wall and landed with a gymnast's flourish. To be fair, a male gymnast. As he strode past us, his silhouette was a touch less jaunty. Not the form of a happy man. Whatever he'd expected out in the orchard, the night hadn't gone as he'd planned. Before I could ask Xander for his thoughts, if he had

any, Grandma's bodyguard peeled away from the shadow and slipped into another. I watched him move from patch to patch, all the way back to his room.

My breath came out in one long whoosh. Situations in Greece (or maybe just in my family) had a way of getting tense, fast.

No longer in the mood to swim, I hoofed it back to the shack. On the way, I checked my phone. Grandma had left a message.

"Katerina," she said, "where are your shoes? Put them back on before people think you are poor."

The headline hit my eyes with an accusatory thud.

That's what I got for cruising the Crooked Noses Message Board when sleep was a recent memory. The coffee hadn't kicked in yet, I decided. Coffee needed to kick in before the day could really start to happen. Before then, everything was an assault.

Katerina Makri 2.0 Consults the Cups, Creates Havoc.

The headline came with a picture of me scowling in to my itty-bitty coffee cup. The second picture was a charming shot of me jaywalking, almost causing a collision, the caption read, with my antics. The third picture was me nailing Hera in the shin.

The comments were scathing. The Crooked Noses unleashed their keyboard power, popped the lids on their Mountain Dew, dug deep in their Doritos' (or whatever Greek keyboard jockeys ate) bags, and let me have it from the confines of their parents' basements. I was just jealous, they wrote, of a more attractive woman, that's why I attacked Hera. Clearly I didn't give a rat's hiney about Greece's laws, which was why I'd bolted in front of traffic like it was my God-given right. As far as they were concerned I was on my way to becoming Baboulas; I even had her name.

She's hot, one Crooked Noser wrote. I'd do her.

The others charged in, accusing him of being a 'white knight', which was apparently an insult.

Who had taken these pictures? Not the guy Elias chased; wrong angle, plus, at the time, he was busy running the other way.

A voice of brief reason stepped in to set the record straight-ish. The object of my alleged jealousy was an NIS agent, BangBang wrote. The NIS, he went on, were following my every move, even though my slate was clean.

BangBang was often the voice of reason around these parts. We messaged, occasionally. Sometimes I wondered if he or she was an insider, someone with more than an interest in organized crime.

There were no new replies after his—or her—intervention.

Curiosity drove me to take a sneak peak in the sub forum dedicated to the Camorra. Murder and mayhem, as per usual, it looked like, what with the Camorra being the Mafia with ADHD and a meaner streak. According to those who knew about such things—or enjoyed speculating—Aldo had gone missing, and his body was expected to float to the surface of one filthy river or another, sometime soon.

Little did they know Aldo had fled to Greece, sharing a ride with yours truly. I hadn't seen the man since Grandma's hospital room. I just assumed he gone on his merry way with his bag of money. Wouldn't the Crooked Noses flip if they knew about my inside track?

Backing up, I had a problem. Well, a lot of problems. But now I had one more. Apparently someone with a camera was following me around. A quick scroll through the forum's older posts revealed footage of me delivering my chair-top proclamation. Another thread contemplated my alleged pregnancy, including the identity of the father. (If a cat in heat made babies with a porn star, I'd be the offspring they decided—that's how amoral I apparently was.) Someone had dredged up my yearbook photos, filling a thread with the ghosts of bad haircuts past. I half expected to see a Q and A with Todd, my once-closeted ex.

If I wanted to move around unimpeded—and I did—I'd have to steal an invisibility cloak.

More depressed than motivated, I scrounged up some breakfast, showered, crept out to the toilet where hopefully no one was witnessing my walk of outhouse shame. The shack and its stupid outhouse were a family heirloom, passed from eldest child to eldest child. In time, I'd be the lucky recipient of this fine abode. I sure as hell hoped Grandma had plans to live forever.

"Katerina ..." a voice floated out of the bushes on the far side of Grandma's yard. "I can see you. Are you going to the outhouse?"

I jumped. My heart crawled up into my throat, clanging frantically. One of my top ten first world fears had materialized.

"Meep," I said pathetically.

Takis' head appeared over the fence. The face part of his head was grinning. "What is wrong with you, eh?"

"Nothing," I muttered. "I hate you."

"That makes two of you," he said. "You and Marika, you could be the 'We Hate Takis' club."

"Oh no, I'm sure there are more members. A lot more members. Everyone who ever met you, for starters. We're thinking about getting T-shirts."

He gave me a two handed *moutsas* then vanished, leaving me to decide just how bad I needed to go.

In the end, I went ... and I went. And when I was done, I snuck back out with the same bent neck and hunched shoulders that told any eyewitnesses that I was just a woman very interested in dust, dirt, and any recent castaways from Grandma's forest of potted plants. Oooh, look—a curled leaf.

But my newfound nature appreciation had to wait when I heard yells from the front of the compound.

Surrounded by the family dogs, and one goat that was mine, I wandered out the front to check out the hubbub.

Up on the wall surrounding the compound, a dozen Makris boys were pitching stones at something I couldn't see. A metal thing, by the sound of the thunks. The boys had small mountains of rocks in varying sides piled up beside them. Marika's boys were posted there like an army of monkeys, along with Tomas and his brothers. Tomas wasn't in on the game. The littlest of Litsa's boys was sitting on the wall, doodling in a notebook.

"What's going on?" I asked the cousins who were gathered around the guard shack smoking and laughing.

"See for yourself," one of them said, scooting aside so I could get a look. He was one of many. Half the guys in the family shared a name. The only way to tell them apart was to tack their parents' names onto the end of their own. As the only Makris female born in decades I was lucky. The only person I had to share a name with was Grandma, and almost nobody called her Katerina anyway, unless it was to her face.

On the other side of the wall three NIS vans were getting paintwork done. Tiny chips of paint floated to the ground as the stones made contact. One of Marika's boys palmed a coconut-sized rock. He bowled it at the nearest van.

The rock bounced off the windshield, leaving a webbed crater in the glass.

With a crash, the van's side door rolled open. Hera leaped out and stormed over to the wall.

My cousins laughed.

"This is going to be good," Stavros said, rubbing his hands together.

Hera's face was thunderous. They'd be lucky if she didn't shoot them. "Keep throwing those rocks, you little bastards!"

That was a woman with a death wish. If their mothers heard her they'd kill her on the spot.

"Okay," one of Tomas's older brothers said. He pitched another stone at the van. This one bounced off the roof.

The wicked witch stalked to the gates.

“Your animals are out of control. I could have them taken away like this.” She snapped her fingers. “Sent to foster homes. Maybe even adopted out to other countries. I hear they like little Greek boys in Turkey.”

I pushed forward. “Wow, Hera, how are you going to explain this one to your boss? You’ve already lost one van ... and a couple of sources along with it. I don’t think Greece can afford to replace vans as quickly as you destroy them.”

She shocked the stuffing out of me when she said, “You’re right. I should do something about that. In fact—” her smile was big scary red thing that only a fashion photographer and most straight men, lesbians, and probably babies could love; damn her “—I have an idea.”

Without giving me a chance to fire off a hit of sarcasm (which was lucky because I hadn’t lined up a comeback yet) she turned to the boys on the wall. Between them they spanned the range between preschool and graduation. They were grubby; they were loud; they were Makris boys.

Hera waved to them and amped up her smile. She struck a red carpet pose in front of the wall, hands on hips, leg out front and center.

“Stop throwing rocks and I’ll show you my boobs.”

Rocks fell to the ground. Mouths dropped open. Eyes widened to the size of dinner plates.

She had them, just like that. Immediate ceasefire.

Oh, she was *good*. The bitch.

Like magic, I found myself standing at the back of the smallish crowd at the gate as the Makris men stormed the gate. Only Stavros was hanging back, disinterested.

“Are you sick?” I asked him.

“It’s just boobs,” Stavros said, shrugging. “Who hasn’t seen boobs before? Even cows have boobs. They have four. Four is more than two.” His elementary school education had finally paid off.

Risking death by horny mob, I squeezed back through to the front of the crowd in time to catch Hera unbuttoning her shirt. A hush moved through the field of grown men. The boys on the wall stared down at her reverently. All except Tomas, whose tiny dark head remained bowed over the notepad.

The mountains of Hera were pretty spectacular. Even I was impressed, and here I was with a pair of my own speed bumps.

En masse, my cousins crossed themselves. One of them wiped a tear away. “It is a miracle,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “They’re just lumps of meat and skin. Everybody has them.” Not like that they didn’t, but still ... “You even have

nipples—all you guys. And they don't look all that different to what she's got."

They ignored me.

"It's no good," Stavros said from behind me. "They're boob-struck."

Sigh. "Hey, Hera? The longer you leave those out, the greater the risk of gravity snatching them and running."

"I almost never wear a bra," she said.

"Sunburn? I hear sunburned nipples are a bitch."

"I sunbathe topless all the time." She was right, she evidently did. No strap marks.

I scrambled for ideas. I pulled out my phone, carefully lined up Hera and the gawking boys, and snapped.

Her head whipped around. "What are you doing?"

"A picture of an NIS agent exposing herself to children is worth so much more than a thousand words."

Night fell instantly on the peaks of Hera as her shirt snapped shut. She looked like she wanted to stab me in the everything. "You can't do that!"

Sounds of disappointment surrounded me. Too bad, so sad.

"I can't? Huh. Funny. I would have sworn it was me taking the picture." I jiggled my phone at the bars. She swiped at it and missed. "Wouldn't matter. I sent it to a secure location, pervert. Several, actually."

Her mouth dropped open, and then it slowly closed, sealing itself with a smirk. "How do you feel about going back to Italy? I hear a certain counterfeiter would like to see you again."

"How do you feel about me releasing this picture to the world, kiddie diddler? How long will your cushy government job last then?" I held up my fingers, framed her face in the air. "I can see you picking olives for a living."

"I'm not done with you," she snarled. "Wherever you go I will be watching."

"Like you were trying to watch Melas?"

She made a small noise of surprise.

"He told me how he found you in his house, bugging the place. That's sad and desperate. Don't you have any dignity?"

"I wouldn't have to bug his house if he didn't associate with you and your family. Nikos is getting soft on crime, thanks to you. He has forgotten who the enemy is, who the good guys are."

"Bugging his house puts you on the wrong side of the line."

"I'm saving him from himself!"

"Last time I looked he was a grown man." And what a man he was, but I didn't say the words aloud. Why dangle raw steak in front of a crocodile?

“You know nothing about Greek men. They are boys all their lives. They go from their mamas to their wives, believing they are gods.”

“Go away, Hera. If you can’t help me then you’re just in my way.”

“I’m going, but I will be watching. Never forget that.”

We’d see about that. Kyria Melas’s parting words had left an indelible impression in my brain, right under the rock where my shame and guilt often huddled together and made plans to do nothing about anything.

Proactivity—I had to find my inner balls and do something about something.

What I had were two problems, I realized in the hours after the incident with Hera’s boobs, that I could solve with one bold, ridiculous move. Not only was the NIS following me, but also someone was taking happy snaps of me and sticking them on the internet. On top of that, Hera had dangled the possibility of information about Dad in front of my nose then yanked it away. Following her might yield some answers. My constant audience had to go.

First thing’s first: I needed a car that wasn’t a yellow Beetle.

To the garage!

Like a cartoon character, I burst into the compound’s massive garage, where dozens of vehicles waited for their chance to serve.

“I need a car,” I called out to the cousin on duty. “Something discreet.”

My cousin kept on waxing the already gleaming hood of black sports car. Except for my Beetle, Aunt Rita’s Barbie convertible, and her Pepto-pink moped, everything housed in the garage was the same dark shade of Grandma’s soul—if you believed the stories, newspapers, and facts.

“Something wrong with the Volkswagen?”

“It’s yellow. You can’t hide yellow unless you’re in a banana grove.”

“We don’t have those here,” he admitted.

Greece wasn’t exactly banana central. In fact, I hadn’t seen a single one since I got here. I put finding a banana on the to-do list.

“How about a black one?” I asked.

“I don’t know if we have one available.”

I looked at the cars, looked at him. “Seriously?”

“They are busy.”

“Doing what?”

“Sleeping.”

“Come on. Teeny tiny.”

He dolloped more wax onto the smooth surface. “I don’t know ...”

“Please. Just one itty-bitty black car.”

“Baboulas has not approved it. I need her permission or Xander’s.”

Xander's? What the hell? He'd never approve my request, and Grandma was higher than the monasteries at Meteora at the moment.

"Forget it," I said. In my head I was skipping to Plan B. The problem was Plan B didn't exist. Yet. While my mind percolated, I went in search of sage advice. Or advice. Wisdom wasn't a have-to, although it would be nice.

Brain clunking along, I hurried to Papou's apartment and knocked. He yanked open the door, glared out at me.

"Are you taking Yiorgos and me to the woods?"

"What? No!"

"You promised. Snakes, remember? More snakes than you have ever seen. You will ask yourself why there are so many motherfucking snakes in your motherfucking room. Then, as you are dying, you will remember Papou and his poor eagle."

"That's very dramatic. Were you on the stage in Ancient Greece?"

He slammed the door in my face. I knocked again.

The door opened. "What?"

"I have a question."

"Every idiot has questions. Clever people have the answers."

"That's why I'm here. I'm looking for a clever person."

"Hmm ..." He eyed me warily through lemon yellow eyes. "What is your question?"

"In the old days, how did you follow someone discreetly?"

"What makes you think I ever did that?" I raised an eyebrow. He made a face. "Okay, maybe I did. It depends. Car, motorcycle, and once on a donkey."

Donkey? I didn't like the sound of that. "What if none of those were an option?"

"Bicycle. And I hoped the mark did not have a car or a faster bicycle." He did a zigzag hand wave through the air. "The vehicle is only part of the problem. You want to follow someone, you better have a good disguise."

"So they don't recognize you?"

"And so they can't, even later. Are you planning to follow someone?"

"Maybe."

"Baboulas will not like it."

"Grandma is in the hospital."

"Sure, she is in the hospital, but she has long, stretchy arms that can go SLAP out of nowhere when you least expect it." He leaned forward and slapped me lightly, then laughed. "Heh. Just like that. You want another one?" SLAP.

"I could push you off a cliff."

SLAP.

I ducked but his hand found me anyway. SLAP.

“Or ... I’ll tell Grandma you told me how to follow someone.”

“Tell her. I am not scared of that old donkey.” He made donkey noises. “I knew her long before she became Baboulas.”

He’d piqued my curiosity. Family history wasn’t my strong suit. “How long?”

“Long enough that I know better than to answer your questions.” He looked me up-down. “Who are you going to follow?”

“Who said I’m following anyone? Maybe my question was hypothetical.”

He laughed. It was all chest-and-shoulder heaving and very little noise. “A funny thing happens when you get old: young people think you are an idiot.”

“Hera. The NIS agent.” Saying it aloud it sounded even more preposterous than it had in the privacy of my head. Maybe following her wasn’t such a great idea.

“*Po-po* ...” Papou said, rolling his eyes. “What is worse than an idiot? You are that.”

The Greek exclamation meant he thought I was out of my mind. Which was probably true, but people—meaning me—do crazy things when the people they love are in danger.

“I know. Are you going to tell Grandma?”

“Maybe ...” His yellowing, rheumy eyes twinkled. “What is it worth to you for me to keep my mouth shut, eh?”

“Are you blackmailing me?”

“Of course. In the old days I was one of the best.”

I groaned. “What do you want?”

He grinned.

Chapter 16

AUNT RITA: mistress of disguises. A few days ago she'd dolled Melas up in leather pants and a wig that made him look like something Jon Bon Jovi coughed out of his lung back in 1988. Even his best buddy hadn't recognized him at first.

She clapped her hands like a preschooler who'd spent the afternoon sucking on a tube of high-fructose corn syrup when I asked for her help.

My aunt's apartment was tastefully decorated, not what you'd expect from someone as flamboyant as she was. Her closet was a different matter. It was everything I'd imagined, and then some. Feathers, furs, rainbows, and more fake hair than a Cher concert. Oz's Princess Langwidere would writhe with envy if she knew about Aunt Rita's closets with all its polystyrene, wig-topped heads.

"Exotic and deadly, or boring and invisible?" Aunt Rita pressed her hands together, feigning prayer. "Please, please, please say the first one."

"Invisible. Definitely invisible. I want to be so dull I fade into the background."

She sighed like I was killing her. "One of these days ..." She wiggled her crimson-tipped fingers. "One of these days I will dress you up and the entire world will fall at your feet. Or maybe just Detective Melas, eh?"

The idea sounded appealing, which meant now was the perfect time to shut it down. "What's wrong with the way I dress?"

"Nothing." She made a little face. "But why waste the gifts God gave you?"

"Melas likes to flirt, but when it comes down to it he belongs with the Heras of the world. She's a ten, he's a ten. Imagine how beautiful their kids would be."

"On the outside she is a seven, at best. On the inside she's a zero. That one is poison and Nikos Melas knows it." She gave my cheeks a gentle pinch and smiled down at me. "You are a ten in every way. Believe me when I tell you he likes you."

He did like me, but we could never happen. We were all prologue and no story, Nikos Melas and I.

"Okay," my aunt went on, rubbing her hands together, "Boring and invisible. I haven't been boring and invisible since I was a man, but I will see what magic I can weave."

An hour later I was experiencing a real *Boys Don't Cry* moment. Hilary Swank, eat your girl-balls out.

"This wasn't exactly what I had in mind," I said. "I was thinking something maybe black."

"Like Catwoman?" she asked hopefully.

"Less Catwoman, more shadow in the night."

Aunt Rita began rifling through her closet. "Catwoman. Shadow. Okay."

Next time I looked in the mirror I was the Phantom of the Opera, minus the mask. "Isn't it too hot to wear a cloak?"

"Fashion is suffering. It's a beautiful cloak. Bespoke, from Paris."

"Less satin, maybe?"

"Okay ..."

Thirty minutes later, my aunt was chewing on her bottom lip. It was the first time I'd seen her confidence waver. "I don't know," she muttered. "It's so ..."

"Perfect?"

"Not the word I would use, but I am working with the rules you gave me."

Perfect was definitely the word I'd use. Aunt Rita had decked me out in a frumpy black skirt, black knee-high socks, a loose black shirt. My hair was hidden under a black kerchief. Do you know who notices widows in Greece? Nobody. Greek villagers only notice women who should be (in their gossipy estimation) wearing black, not the ones who are already performing their duty to the dead. For widows, black is a life sentence.

Aunt Rita tucked a stray hair back into the kerchief and tossed down a pair of flat backless loafers for me to slide my feet into. Also black, of course. "Do you have a vehicle?"

"No, they wouldn't give me one."

She patted my shoulder. "Leave it to me."

Trusting someone who says "leave it to me" is risky business.

I looked at the moped parked by the fountain. I recognized it from when I'd ridden it before.

"Wasn't this pink, or am I losing my mind?"

"It was pink. Now it is black."

"How?"

Aunt Rita looked genuinely puzzled. "They don't have paint in America?"

"Yes, but earlier today it was pink."

"I had the cousins paint it while we were playing dress-up."

"That was an hour ago."

"Fast-drying paint," she assured me.

Did I feel reassured? Nope.

I gave my aunt a kiss on both cheeks and rolled toward the gates. The moped was narrow enough that it could slip through the side gate for foot traffic. Why advertise the family's movements to the NIS more than necessary?

Takis was outside the guardhouse shooting the breeze with the guard on duty.

When he spotted me, he crouched down, waved in my face. "Hello, old lady. What are you doing?"

"Christ with a canary, it's just me."

"Katerina?" He looked me up and down. His face broke into a shit-eating grin. "Looks to me like you made some improvements. Big date?"

"Secret mission."

He nodded like he knew. "Baboulas set you up with an old man, eh?"

Keeping it classy, I raised my middle finger, which only made him laugh. "Perfect," he said, "now your transformation is complete. You are just like every Greek widow ever."

"Ten euro says Marika dyes her entire wardrobe yellow when you die."

His expression darkened. "She would not dare."

I made a face. "She might if she had encouragement."

"You would not dare."

My fingers waggled. "Toodles, old chap," I said in English. He grabbed at me, but the moped zipped out of reach.

The night was a dark one. It was slow going through the orchard, grove, whatever it was called, but that was okay. Slow was my goal. Slow is how you sneak up on people and plant yourself on their butts. My intention was to become a barnacle ... or a tick. Where Hera went, I'd follow, while avoiding anyone who was tailing me. In my fantasy, Hera would go crazy trying to figure out where I'd vanished to. I'd be her shadow, her— My phone vibrated. I stopped to answer.

"What are you doing?" Melas asked.

"That depends," I whispered. "What do you think I'm doing?"

"Why are you whispering?"

"Have you looked outside? It's nighttime. I'm using my night voice."

There was silence. At first I thought he'd ended the call—damn you, cellphones!—then he sighed. "Are you on a date with that doctor?"

The doctor. Ugh. I slapped my forehead. I'd forgotten about the

doctor and tonight's date.

"You know I'm single, right? I can date whoever I like."

"Do you like him?"

"I haven't met him."

"Then you're not out with him right now?"

"No! I'm sneaking between the trees outside the compound."

"What?"

Oops! I ended the call, turned off the ringer, stuffed the phone back into the pocket in Aunt Rita's somber skirt. If I was lucky Melas wouldn't come looking for me. Although knowing Hera, she was already tracking him, and the last thing I wanted was him leading her to me. As far as disguises went this was a pretty good one and I didn't want it compromised.

Mount Pelion's main road was just up ahead. I wheeled Aunt Rita's moped to the tree line and peeked out. Sure enough, the NIS vans were lined up like marshmallows. All that white, clearly they weren't worried about discretion. The engines were off, the windows were down, the doors wide open. A thin curl of cigarette smoke rose from the far side. There was low chatter, and every so often someone chuckled.

I crouched down behind ... I don't know ... some kind of tree to assess the situation, which was a fancy way of saying I was watching the watchers. The tree was a treeish one, jutting up between crude hedges of gnarled bushes.

Okay ... where was Hera? It was possible she'd ridden her broom to rip off a wiener or slap a kitten, but sooner or later she'd be back. Operation Stalk the Makris Family was her pet, and I was the paw she wanted to twist so the mouth of the dog would yelp.

Then the front van shook and Hera climbed out. She fanned her face with one hand and glanced around with a sour twist to her painted lips.

"Sooner or later we'll be able to pick the scab," she said into her phone. "Scab can't dodge me forever."

"Us," one of the other agents called out. "You mean dodge us." He wasn't visible but Hera flipped him off anyway.

Scab? What or who was Scab?

"The uncle is here, too," she said, addressing whoever was on the other end. "So far he's done nothing except sit around the hospital room with his mother, playing the devoted son. If only Scab knew." Hera laughed into the phone. "If only they all knew." The person on the other end had something to say about that. Hera quit laughing fast. "I haven't forgotten. No, I told her we don't know anything about her father."

A gasp shot into my throat but never made it out, mostly thanks to

the whopping huge hand covering my mouth. I stuck out my tongue and licked it, but only because I couldn't get a good bite. The hand vanished as quickly as it had appeared, then it wiped its palm down my cheek.

I smothered a yelp and twisted around to see Xander crouched behind me. Well, he was a dark blob, but a distinctly Xander-shaped dark blob. I didn't know many dark blobs shaped like beefcake. Melas was broad through the shoulders, but he was a leaner cut of muscle than Grandma's favorite bodyguard.

"Why aren't you at the hospital?" I whispered.

Using two fingers, he pointed to his eyes then to me. His message was clear: he was watching me.

"Grandma's orders or Hera's?"

Nothing. I couldn't gauge his reaction because of all this darkness.

"Forget I asked," I said. "The only answer is Grandma, because even if you were the NIS's guy you'd lie. It's all very Princess Bride. A clever guy would say Grandma, because only a fool would admit to being NIS when his boss is a deadly crime lord. And you don't strike me as a fool so you'd definitely say Grandma, because I'm her granddaughter and I'd tell her if I was sure you were an NIS mole." I made a face. "If you're confused, that makes two of us."

I felt rather than saw the edges of his lips rise, but I definitely saw the outline of his head shake. My long-term plan was to slowly drive him to drink and squeeze the answers out of him while he was inebriated. If he wasn't a drinker, he would be after another month or so with me around.

That was a sobering thought. Summer was almost over, and still no Dad. I'd never lived through an autumn without him.

Xander inched forward until we were hunkered down behind the tree, side by side. We sat. We watched. My legs got numb so I sat flat on the dirt. Xander shifted positions, too. Stakeouts were boring. At least the NIS vans had monitoring devices, snacks, and—judging from the shouts and expletives spraying from inside the van—board games.

After a while, what with Xander keeping me company and all, I began to feel like I owed him an explanation of some kind.

"Hera knows something about my father's disappearance. At first she said she did, then she said she didn't, but I think she was lying the second time. So my master plan is to follow her around and figure out what she knows—if anything. What do you think?"

He shrugged.

Xander had the communication skills of a brick wall.

"Hera mentioned someone or something called Scab. Does that sound familiar?"

Nothing from the silent man.

“Scab?” I gnawed on a hangnail. “Who or what is Scab? Is that a Greek Scab or an English Scab? Because I only know what a scab is in English.”

He looked at me. The penny dropped.

“*I’m Scab?* Are you kidding me?” I flopped back on the dirt. “That’s the best code name they could come up with? A whole dictionary at their disposal and that’s what they chose? That’s pathetic. Or I’m pathetic. I don’t know which is worse. Scab. Why Scab?”

Xander shrugged. Again.

I pulled out my phone and Googled. About thirty seconds later I pocketed the phone. Scab—or SCAB—was an insult aimed at American women. Stupid Caucasian American Bitch.

Charming. I bet Hera Googled that all by herself.

“Do you have a codename?” I muttered. “I bet you do, and I bet it’s a good one. Something edgy, like Tasty Python or Silent But Deadly. Grandma probably has a good one, too. A name that doesn’t grow over open wounds. Scab. Ha. She’s such a cow, and all because she thinks I’m sleeping with Melas. Which,” I pointed out, “I’m not.”

Xander stood. Probably he didn’t want to hear all about how I wasn’t doing the horizontal mambo—or any kind of mambo—with Melas. I wasn’t miffed. It wasn’t like we were friends anyway. Xander reached down and hauled me up off the ground. He touched a finger to his lips; the international sign for “shut the hell up.”

Fine. If Xander wanted me to be quiet I’d be quiet.

“What is it?”

The whites of his eyes shifted and I knew he was rolling them at me. He nodded to the road. Sure enough a vehicle was pulling up alongside the vans. I heard a car window roll down, then the driver said, “We’ve had complaints about your vans blocking the road. Move along.”

Shit, shit, shit. Melas was here. I hoped he wasn’t about to start poking around the tree line.

“We’re not blocking the road,” one of the NIS guys said. “We’re on the shoulder.”

There was a pause filled with disbelief. Then: “Have you looked at the road? There’s no shoulder.”

“Of course there’s a shoulder. How else could we be on the shoulder?”

“There’s no shoulder,” Melas said in his no-bullshit cop voice. “If you don’t get these vans out of here I’m going to get busy writing tickets and call a tow truck.”

Hera’s head popped up like a meerkat at the sound of Melas’s voice. “Nikos, is that you?” Like she didn’t know. Her fake coyness made me barf a little in my mouth.

“What’s happening?” another voice whispered behind us.

Elias had joined our sad party.

“Jeez,” I whispered back, rolling my eyes. “This was supposed to be a solo mission.”

“I have orders,” Elias said. He was right, he did have orders. And I suppose I was glad he and Xander were here, what with the scary woods surrounding me and all. Trees are beautiful during the day, but at night they look like servants of the devil.

A few dozen feet away Hera said, “Are you hungry, Nikos? I’m starving. Let’s go down to the *paralia* and eat. My treat.”

Ugh, could she be more obvious? Next thing she’d be asking him to come back to her place.

“After,” she continued in a sickly sweet voice, “you could come back to my place. Or we could go back to yours. Do you still have the pole?”

Double ugh!

Elias snorted. Xander said nothing.

“You know I do,” Melas said, keeping it neutral and professional. “I caught you and your guys in my house, remember? The firehouse pole is still there. You can’t miss it.”

“But I do miss it,” she said, all seductive sexpot and zero shame.

There was a pause, then Melas said in a stiff, cool voice, “Move the vans. They can’t be here.”

Tires crunched as he threw the police car into reverse, pulling onto the shoulder that didn’t exist. Hera and the NIS guys piled into their vans, performed three-point-turns, and sped towards Makria, just up the road.

Yikes! I had to follow them. That’s what the disguise and subterfuge was all about.

It was a risky move, but I wheeled the moped out of the trees and onto the shoulder, where Melas was watching the vans’ taillights fade, arms folded.

“That’s private property you were on,” he said to me.

I kept my head down, mumbled something about how I was sorry in a voice I hoped didn’t sound too much like my own.

“Wait—Katerina?” Disbelief coated the question. “What are you doing?”

I started the moped and pushed off but his hand snapped out in front of me, chest high.

“Don’t even think about it,” he said.

I shoved his hand away. “I’m not thinking about it—I’m doing it.”

He looked me up and down then grinned, despite himself. “What are you wearing?”

“What does it look like I’m wearing?”

“Who died?”

“You, if you don’t let me go.”

“Are you following Hera?”

“Maybe.”

“Why? Is it because of me?”

I snorted. “You wish.” I shoved his hand out of the way and pulled out onto the road, bound for Makria.

A moment later three car doors slammed, then I felt the warm hum of a police car on my tail. I glanced in the side mirror. Melas, Xander, and Elias were in tepid pursuit.

The village of Makria is a whopping half-kilometer—about a quarter mile—up the road from the family compound. Makria’s citizens are good, solid people. Hard workers. Decent. Discreet. Their jobs are the jobs that have always existed in this area. Bakers, grocers, farmers, and one priest. Melas’s father owns Makria’s bakery. We hadn’t met yet, but I pictured him as a big barrel of a man who lived in wife-beaters and was the proud owner of a bushy mustache that resembled a skittish forest creature. For some odd reason when I pictured Melas Sr. he never looked like his devilishly handsome son. Makria’s cobbled streets are for foot traffic only, with special dispensations for livestock and bicycles. If you bring a car you have to leave it in the parking lot outside the village.

I didn’t get that far.

Hera and her dastardly squadron were regrouping in the parking lot, the way evil has a tendency to do in the dark. I stayed back and out of sight, killing the engine not far from the village and closing the distance on foot. My entourage followed suit.

The tiny village of Makria was all lit up. Alive with music, dancing, and the general merrymaking that accompanied food, the village square partied the night away. Lucky for me, the shadows around Makria were thick enough to hide a secret or two.

I crouched down behind a low wall, a roughly hewn pile of stones cemented together with crumbling mortar.

“Your boyfriend is a *poutsokleftis*,” one of the NIS guys was saying to Hera. “He steals them, then he fucks them, then he eats them.” Then he yelped. “You are crazy!”

“Nikos and I are a team.” Hera’s voice wafted over like a noxious gas. “If you call him a dick thief you’re calling me a dick thief. I don’t think you want to call me a dick thief. Every dick I’ve seen was offered to me—including yours.”

The other guy yelped again, then he went silent.

“Are we clear?” Hera said.

There was a mumbled, pained answer I couldn’t make out.

Hera raised her voice to include everyone in her posse.

“Unfortunately he’s right—but not about the dick stealing.”

“You mean he’s right that you’re crazy? We know.”

I saw Hera stick her arm out. There was a low buzz, then the agent fell to the ground with a heavy thud. No one picked him up. Friendship wasn’t really a thing among snakes, I guessed.

“Nikos showing up is a problem. I’ll have to persuade him to be more cooperative.” Her voice had a smirk in it.

Was Melas hearing this?

Worry ballooned inside my gut. Melas had made it abundantly clear that he and Hera had no future, and their past was basically an ancient relic, but Hera was all of Greece’s most beautiful goddesses rolled into one perfect body. Melas was male—overtly male. There’s a limit to how long a person can stare at a chocolate cake before they lose control and cram it into their mouth, one messy fistful at a time.

“It’s late,” Hera said. “Scab isn’t leaving her coop until tomorrow and we can’t just grab her off private property, so let’s pick this up in the morning. Stathis—is that your name? —You stay here tonight and monitor the situation.”

“Five years we’ve been working together,” Stathis—apparently—said, “and she never remembers me.”

“I only remember people who matter,” Hera said.

Papou Was Waiting in Grandma’s yard when I slouched back to the compound. On his shoulder sat Yiorgos the eagle, looking pissed off at the world.

“Did you forget? You forgot, eh? Nobody remembers the dead.”

“I didn’t forget,” I said. “And you’re not dead yet.”

The truth was I’d forgotten I’d promised him—again—that we’d go hunting tonight for the sake of his eagle’s mental health.

“You forgot,” he said, smirking. “After all I did for you. Now let us go.”

I looked down at my groovy threads. “Can I change first?”

“Into what? You look great. Better than ever. Every day you look more like your Grandmother.”

Just what I needed to hear right now.

We ventured into the forest of trees on Grandma’s property. The paved surface ran out fast.

Papou’s nifty wheels stopped. “If only I had somebody to push me,” he said in a sad, pathetic, completely manipulative way.

“If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.”

“What is that shit? Some kind of American shit? Horses, beggars,” he muttered. “Just push the wheelchair before I shoot you.”

The threat wasn't empty. Papou kept a shotgun on the rack mounted behind his wheelchair. "Is the gun loaded?"

He waggled his eyebrows. "Maybe. You want to find out?"

When it came to guns I found it was always best to err on the side that didn't go bang, which means I shut my mouth and pushed the chair.

"This is how I roll," Papou said cheerfully.

Trees gobbled us up. Things got dark fast. Grandma's equivalent of a *consigliere* looked down at the snapping twigs beneath his wheels. "Make some more noise, okay? I do not think they heard you over in Turkey. How can my eagle hunt for food if you are so loud that you scare his food away, eh?"

I stopped pushing. Kept walking.

"Hey, where you are you going? Are you abandoning me in the woods? Good idea. Why did I not think of it? I could have been dead years ago."

Papou acted like he had a death wish. Ask me, what he liked was the attention and planning of his own exit. Grandma really needed to give him something more constructive to do than advise her.

"Okay," I said, reluctantly turning back. I eyed Yiorgos. "Let's see if he'll hunt." I gently extricated the eagle's head from the little leather hood. Yiorgos flashed me his one facial expression. "Shoo. Go find whatever it is eagles eat."

The bird sat there. The eagle had no idea how to do eagle things. Mostly he'd delivered packages before.

"Give him a poke," Papou said. "I cannot bring myself to do it." He stopped, cupped a hand to his liver-spotted ear. "There is someone else out here with us." Papou raised his voice. "Hey, *malakas*, we can hear you. You think you are clever and sneaky like the fox, but you huff and puff like a train." He sniffed the air. "Did you *klaso*? What did you eat, eh? Your mama's cooking?"

If someone was out there they were quiet. "Maybe you should send your eagle to check it out."

"He might get hurt. You should go."

"Me?"

"Is there something wrong with your hearing? Go."

"And if it's a bad guy?"

"We are the bad guys."

He had a point. Still, I didn't fancy wandering into the darkness alone.

"Probably it's just Uncle Kostas again."

Tectonic plates shifted on his forehead. Ravines deepened. "Eh? What do you mean again?"

I told him about my uncle's late-night sojourn the previous

evening.

“Around in circles, eh? Did he have a cigarette?”

“Not that I could see or smell.”

“A dirty magazine?”

“His hands were in his pockets,” I said. “I think.”

“Did I ask what you think? Tell me only what you know.”

“No magazine. Unless it was teeny tiny and in his pocket.”

His eyes closed. His head lolled back. Several moments passed. Was he dead? I really hoped he wasn’t dead.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright. “That way,” he whispered, finger pointed straight ahead. “What are you waiting for?”

“A weapon?”

“Show him your boobs, you will not need a weapon.”

To be offended or not to be offended? “What if it’s a woman?”

“Then you better hope she likes to do scissors with other women.”

Jeez.

Nothing about his plan sounded reasonable, but I crouched down and slunk off in the direction of his pointer finger. Disrespecting my elders didn’t come easily to me. Guilt is hardwired into Greek DNA. We’re like Jews and Catholics that way. Even my American half couldn’t cancel out the guilt gene. I’d let Papou down once; I couldn’t do it again. Hence the sneaking.

The night thickened. The trees huddled closer together and took turns poking me. Were they Ents? Because I thought they could be Ents. Regular trees aren’t out to get you unless you’re in a fantasy novel or a fairy tale. Whatever they were they didn’t feel friendly, what with their jabbing me in the eyes and other soft places. If there was someone out here—and I had my doubts—maybe they were having better luck with the trees.

A twig snapped, and it wasn’t my fault. Either there really was a person out there, or there was an animal big enough to make twigs snap audibly. Did Greece have bears? I didn’t think so, but you never knew. Greece had a lot of Russian immigrants, of the legal and illegal kind. And Russians were known for their dancing bear habits. Or was it Romanians and Bulgarians? Whatever. The whole region was filled with people who got their kicks out of dancing bears. My imagination didn’t have to stretch far to picture all kinds of once-shackled bears roaming through Grandma’s orchards, eager for payback.

I did what any sane person would do. I stopped and held my breath and waited for the bear to eat me. Climbing a tree wouldn’t help, and running doesn’t work on bears either. Bears can climb and run better than twenty-something Greek-American women.

Another twig snapped. Bigger this time. Leaves whispered as someone shoved them aside. Movement came from my left.

I really needed to pee.

Then a black comet shot from somewhere beyond my back, rocketing toward the source of the sound. There was crashing. Shouting. Maniacal laughing. Then there was a lot of cursing.

Me, I didn't stick around. I scurried back to Papou. Papou had a gun. What did I have besides an overactive imagination and a full bladder?

"What is wrong with you, eh?" Papou wanted to know.

"Bear," I said, out of breath. "At least I'm pretty sure it was a bear."

"Bear." He shrugged. "I suppose it is possible."

"Because of the Russians and Bulgarians?"

"Are you crazy? Greece has bears. Brown bears."

"That's not a euphemism for plus-sized hairy gay men, is it?"

His hand shot out. He slapped me on the back of the head. "You have problems in your brain. Who was out there?"

"Just me," a voice said. "And the other *malakas*." The black comet I'd witnessed crashing through the orchard had been Elias. "I almost had him," he said, panting, "but he was too fast."

In a flash, Papou had his shotgun in hand, the bang-bang end pointed at himself. He clobbered Elias around the back of the knees with the non-lethal end.

My bodyguard yelped.

"What kind of monkey does Katerina hire these days? What good are you, eh? In my day I would have hunted down the intruder and shown him what we did to attractive men in the navy."

The night was a dark one, but I could tell Elias and I were looking at Papou with the same horror.

"Moving on," I said, "maybe it was the same guy who was watching me down at the waterfront."

"When was this?" Papou wanted to know.

I told him and he grinned. "Baboulas sent you to see Dora Makri? Ha! I could tell you a story or fifty about Dora Makri."

Elias and I waited. "Well?" I said finally. "Are you going to tell us a story?"

"I would," Papou said sadly, "if I could remember them." Before we could react, he sat the shotgun in his lap and wrapped his mouth around the barrel. The trees muffled the click, rendering it flat and dull.

I sighed with relief and pulled the shotgun away from him.

"It is not loaded," he said. "It never is. And no one will buy ammunition for me." He gave us a hopeful look. "Will you buy ammunition for me?"

"Forget it," Elias said. "Baboulas would kill me."

“She really would,” Papou said sadly. “Oh well, it was worth a try, eh?”

Elias took the shotgun from me, mounting it back on its rack.

“What about Yiorgos?” I asked.

The old man eyed me—or at least I fancied he did. It was dark out there. Facial expressions got lost in translation.

“My bird is broken. I don’t know what to do.”

TAILING someone turned out to be difficult with an entourage. My entourage dressed in black, but where my disguise whispered, “Widow,” theirs screamed, “Secret agent ninja henchmen Navy Seals.” At least their discreet distance was even more discreet than my discreet distance.

Boy, they were good at this. I was just learning. Hopefully this thing with Hera would be the only lesson I’d need before I quit crime entirely and retired to an island with a gorgeous Greek man and our three children.

I shook my head. Where had that come from? I didn’t want the island, the Greek man, or the three children—not yet on the children anyway. Maybe one day when I grew up and figured out what I wanted to be. Some nice, harmless, crime-free career that wouldn’t end in a prison sentence sounded ideal.

It was the following morning, and Hera didn’t seem to be in any hurry to regroup with her posse. She slunk out of her Volos apartment around nine o’clock to buy a magazine from a nearby *periptero*, then vanished back upstairs again. At ten she wandered out wearing a short, tight skirt suit with man-killer heels. She set off down the street to a salon that specialized in manicures, pedicures, and waxing places that don’t normally see a lot of sunlight. Which is funny because Brazil has an overabundance of sun.

“Oh boy,” Marika said, popping up out of nowhere and planting herself beside me outside the produce store. I’d been checking out melons for a while now, and the shopkeeper was getting twitchy. “Is that a Brazilian wax place? I have heard about those. We should get them. An adventure is just what we need. We have not had one in a while.”

Evidently she’d forgotten about our impromptu trip to Naples. “You know they rip off your pubic hair with wax, right?”

She made a face. “I had not heard that part.”

I wondered which part she’d heard, because to me the ripping and the wax was the important part. “And that’s not the only hair they take off.”

She looked at me. I looked back.

“No,” she breathed.

“They make you get on your hands and knees, and then a little Southeast Asian woman ...” I mimed the waxing, the ripping, the owie

face.

Marika turned pale. "I do not think we have little Southeast Asian women in Greece. Probably that is a job for *tsiganes* or Albanians."

"What are you doing here?"

She shrugged, the horrible, hairy reality of Brazilian waxes dissipating. "My job. I like stakeouts. Stakeouts mean coffee and snacks."

"There's no coffee and snacks on this stakeout. And it's not really a stakeout. Mostly I'm just following Hera."

"To see if she is sleeping with Melas?" She hugged me with one arm. "I would be worried about that, too. I bet her *mouni* has teeth."

I pulled back. "The other day you said he'd never touch her again."

"That was then. My mood changes a lot these days."

"Hormones," I said.

"If I do not eat often enough I get bitchy." She glanced around, taking stock of the nearby stores. The city was ratcheting up to full capacity as the morning went on. Clouds of pollution silently assaulted pedestrians clogging the sidewalks. "You want a coffee and maybe a little cake?"

"I thought you were helping me watch Hera."

"I am, but I can do my job better on a full stomach."

Marika stormed a nearby bakery. She came back with a steaming *koulouri*—a soft pretzel covered in sesame seeds—a loaf of bread, and a roast chicken.

I eyed the feast. The roast chicken did smell good. "Where did the chicken come from?"

"Bakery. Somebody forgot to pick up their chicken, so I took it."

Greek bakeries put the empty spaces in their wood fire ovens to good use. For a nominal fee they'll throw in your uncooked main dish and pull it out bubbling.

"Did you take the chicken or did you pay for it? Because there's a difference."

She ripped into the paper surrounding the loaf. "Who knows? My blood sugar is too low. My memory does not work so well when my blood sugar drops."

Pregnancy was turning Marika into a certified loon, and she hadn't been standing on completely stable ground to begin with. Anyone who married Takis on purpose was suspect.

I reached for the bread but Marika yanked it out of my way. "No bread for you—you did not want any."

"That was before I smelled food."

"Concentrate," she said, waving her hand in the salon's direction. "What is the beast doing now?"

The beast, I assumed, was Hera. It was a character assessment I

could agree with wholeheartedly. “She’s inside.”

“Still?” A quarter of the loaf vanished, along with a drumstick. “I guess she has a lot of hair on her *kolos*.”

That thought warmed the cockles of my heart. Yes, I’m a brunette, but it’s not a forest up in there.

An hour later Hera still hadn’t emerged. No offense to Aunt Rita’s skills, but black wasn’t turning out to be the best color for following anyone in early September. I eyed the roast chicken’s carcass and saw my destiny in the remnants of its crispy skin.

Down the street, Elias was hiding behind a newspaper. Xander was hunched over his phone, sipping on a frappe, looking iceberg cool. Black didn’t seem to be bothering them, probably because they were one hundred percent Greek. My Oregonian genes preferred rain and mildew. They longed for a whiff of mold. I wondered who was watching over Grandma if her favorite bodyguard was monitoring my every move. Probably Uncle Kostas, who I trusted as much as a rubber check.

Marika put down the last chicken wing then said, “I should have bought dessert.”

She hopped up from the bench and was this close sprinting to the nearest sugar shop when I spotted Hera. Funny, I’d expected her to be limping, but instead she was swinging her hips the same old way. Probably getting your short n curls yanked out doesn’t hurt if you’re hell spawn. I pictured the NIS agent cackling as the technician got to work with the hot wax.

We followed Hera back to her apartment. Fifteen minutes later she appeared downstairs again, this time in leather pants and a top made of strategically placed strings. The whole thing looked like a risk no insurance agent would take.

Where was she going trussed up like a Thanksgiving bird?

I was hot. I was tired. I was this close to not caring, when Hera hopped into the car snuggled up to the curb and inched away. Traffic was moving at the speed of bureaucracy this morning. The Greeks trapped in the slow-moving flow had to be gnashing their teeth.

“How did you get here?” I asked Marika. “Car?”

“Bus.”

We both looked at Aunt Rita’s moped. Aunt Rita’s moped wasn’t an ambitious vehicle. It knew it was a glorified bicycle built for two, provided one or more of the two wasn’t built like a sofa.

“Probably you should ride with Elias and Xander,” I said.

“How can I guard your body if I am in the car with those two? Body. Guard.” She ticked the two words off on her fingers. “That means I have to guard your body, which means I have to stay close to you.”

I looked at her.

“Very close,” she added.

“Still ...”

She nodded in the moped’s direction. “Those things are bigger than they look.”

Maybe they were, but were they stronger?

“Horse Crap.”

I knew exactly where we were.

“What is it?” Marika peered over my shoulder. She reeked of chocolate cake and chicken. “That looks like a firehouse. Why would that snake come to a firehouse?”

Down the road a short way, Hera flipped her bouncy shampoo-commercial hair over her shoulder, then set off to either make or break a man’s day. It could go either way, I decided. You just never really know with men.

“Former firehouse,” I told her, sweat trickling down and across my chest. My bra was a paddling pool; the girls were drowning. “Detective Melas lives there.”

“Ooh la la,” Marika said, lifting her sunglasses to get a better look. “What do you think she is doing here?”

I could hazard several guesses, and all of them involved nudity and the fireman’s pole. I knew that pole intimately. Once, we’d been handcuffed together.

“I don’t care,” I lied. “I’m trying to find out what she knows about Dad’s kidnapping. She said she knew something, then she took it back.”

Marika gathered up her handbag. “We should peek in the windows.”

I grabbed her arm. “Wait—we can’t. She’ll know we’re there.”

“Leave it to me.”

That sentence wasn’t in the least bit reassuring.

The moped rocked as she climbed off. Further back, Elias and Xander waited in air-conditioned comfort, Rembetika music rattling the glass.

Air conditioning was nice, but it wasn’t *that* nice.

I watched Marika bustle along the razor narrow sidewalk to the house directly across the street from Melas’s repurposed firehouse. She pushed through their gate. Hammered on the front door. Turned around and flashed her teeth at me.

Nope. Still not reassuring.

A spaghetti thin woman decorated with banners of faded black

fabric came to the door. She and Marika exchanged a flurry of words, then Marika waved for me to join her.

Heat rose in dense, damp waves. That same excessive warmth also dropped out of the sky like a falling piano. Still dressed in my widows' finest, I kept my head down as I hurried along the shimmering sidewalk and through Melas's neighbor's garden.

"This is Kyria Kalliope," Marika said, introducing the woman. Kyria Kalliope's complexion was cratered and lined, a map that had been hastily stuffed into the glove compartment and forgotten for three decades.

"Despinida Makris," she said, sniffing. Her steel gaze made a round trip from my head to my shoes. "I am sorry for your loss." She leaned forward as though we were co-conspirators in grief. "Did your grandmother have him killed?"

"Have who killed?"

"Your husband. The newspaper did not say anything about a husband, but your clothes ..."

"It's a disguise," I said, the penny dropping. "Grandma hasn't killed anyone lately ... I don't think."

Kyria Kalliope crossed herself. "Come. You can see into policeman's house from upstairs." She didn't waste time with the usual Greek niceties like iced coffee and cake.

We followed her through a hoarder's paradise, then upstairs to the bathroom. The toilet was an in-ground affair, and Kyria Kalliope had set up a comfortable chair and an occasional table in front of the window. I peered out. Sure enough, she had a direct view of Melas's whole upstairs.

"You," she said suddenly, pointing at me. "Now I know where I have seen you before, besides the newspaper. You were the one handcuffed to the pole."

"That wasn't me," I said.

"I never forget a face. Of course that day you looked much angrier and also hungry. I thought about bringing over a little food, but some of the policeman's women bite."

Yikes!

Marika looked interested. Too interested. "How many women are we talking about?"

Kyria Kalliope made a face. "His bedroom is like the parades on *Ohi* Day. Women march through, sometimes two or more at a time."

Ohi Day (No Day) is a Greek public holiday. Every October 28, the whole country celebrates the day Greece's Prime Minister—and dictator—said, 'Hahahaha-No' to Mussolini when the Italian Supreme Douche-Bag demanded Greece allow Italian forces to set up shop in strategic locations around the country. At three in the morning, the

Prime Minister delivered his one-word rejection. Two and a half hours later, Italy attacked the border, dragging Greece into World War II.

“Huh,” I said. It was the most normal sound I could manage. I’d kind of figured Melas wasn’t exactly a monk. He was bad-boy hot with a legitimate reason to own handcuffs—what wasn’t to love? But the idea that his bedroom had a revolving door stung me in places normally covered with clothes.

“Apart from his mother, the only woman I have seen keep her clothes on in his bedroom is you.”

I’d have to tell Melas to latch his shutters or invest in heavy curtains.

“Do you watch him a lot?” I asked. The binoculars on the occasional table indicated that yes—yes, she watched him a lot.

“I am old,” Kyria Kalliope said. “My family never visits. I have no friends except the other old buzzards in the neighborhood. What else do I have to do? I sit at this window to do my crochet and I watch. Even when nothing is happening it is better than TV.”

Across the street in Melas’s bedroom, Hera appeared. We all watched as she wandered about the room, touching things with her talons.

“Do you see her a lot?”

Melas’s neighbor squinted through the window. “Not for a long time. She is a *skeela*. One morning on the street she did not say ‘*yia sou*’ when I stared at her. When I said her parents needed to spank her for her rudeness, she threatened to have me audited. Who does she think she is?”

“NIS,” I said.

“I *hezo* on the NIS,” she said, painting a gross—but very European—picture. “It is not Greek to creep around, gathering secrets.”

Actually, it was totally Greek. Greeks love other people’s secrets. She or he who knows the most secrets wins. The more sordid the better.

I made a face.

Kyria Kalliope was all over that. “Is it the baby?”

Marika received the full brunt of my dirty look, but she remained oblivious.

“There’s no baby,” I said.

The old woman patted my hand. “I was in denial the first time, too, right up until it came out. Then I acted surprised and said, ‘A baby? I did not even know I was pregnant!’ Of course I was only fifteen and very, very fat, like a watermelon, with piggy eyes and flat feet. In those days women had three choices. Marry the father; marry a man who was not the father; or give the baby to the nuns and pretend it never happened.”

"It never happened. I'm not pregnant."

"Then I hope you know some nuns." She peered out the window. "Look at that *putana*." After crossing herself, she shoved the binoculars at me. "Virgin Mary, what kind of woman is that? I bet she has a *mouni* like a warehouse. Trucks in and out all day."

"I like you," Marika told her.

We watched. We waited. Hera didn't do anything interesting unless arranging herself naked on Melas's bed was interesting. Which it wasn't.

"My Virgin Mary," Kyria Kalliope said. "What happened to her *mouni*?"

I looked. I wished I hadn't. "Brazilian wax."

Down on the street, a car approached and pulled up to the curb. A police car. Melas was home. My guts twisted into loose knots and made a serious attempt at strangling my stomach.

Marika gave me a well-meaning smile. "He will send her away, you will see."

"He never sends them away," the older woman said. "Not until after."

I didn't need to ask after what—I knew exactly what.

Two-handed, I covered my eyes. "I can't watch."

"No problem, I can watch for you," Marika said.

There was silence, and lots of it, from the two women.

Curiosity got the best of me. "Did he throw her out into the street naked?"

"Not yet," Marika said.

"What are they doing?"

"What do you think they are doing?" Marika asked.

"Drinking coffee?"

"Go with that," she said.

Kyria Kalliope jerked away from the window. "They are kissing, and he likes it. Some parts of him more than others."

Feeling totally bummed out, I thanked Kyria Kalliope and slouched back to the moped with my *poor me* face on. Marika's slippers slapped the ground behind me as she hurried to keep up.

"Maybe it was not what it looked like," she said. Remember that movie where the woman is dancing in her house and she is murdered, then it turns out she is alive and really Melanie Griffith—but Melanie Griffith back when she had thin lips and no breasts?"

"You mean *Body Double*?"

She stared at me blankly for a moment. "No ... I think it was called something else."

Foreign translations. I'd done some Googling and discovered that *Die Hard* appeared on the big screen with the title *Very Hard to Die*, so

I could only imagine what they'd done to mangle *Body Double*.

"Forget it," I said. "They were kissing. He had a choice and he chose Hera."

"Maybe she forced him."

"Did it look forced?"

She made a face. "Mostly it looked wet."

Ugh. My heart ached. Stupid heart; it had no business hurting.

I straddled the moped and waited for Marika to climb aboard. She didn't. What she was doing was scratching her head and watching some distant point.

"Everything okay?"

"I thought I saw something," she said.

"What kind of something."

There was a whistling sound, the kind fireworks make on July Fourth. The thought crossed my mind that it was Greece in early September, which meant there shouldn't be any fireworks. Then I remembered I knew next to nothing about fireworks in Greece, and whether or not they were banned like in certain parts of the United States. Then I was all out of time for thinking other things because something fiery was flying through the air towards us.

"Bomb," I screeched, and shoved Marika into the thirsty trees drooping over the sidewalk. I managed to land partly on top of her but not on the pregnant part. The head part was under my chest.

Something went boom behind us, and then there was a horrible crackling sound of newborn fire, followed quickly by the clanging of metal falling to the ground. Moments ago there had been only one metal object nearby and it was part of my disguise. *Was*.

I rolled off Marika's head in time to see Aunt Rita's moped devoured by hungry flames.

Shit. Shit. SHIT.

This was so not my week, my month, my summer. My freakin' *life*.

Feet thundered towards us. Elias and Xander were on the move. Neither man looked amused. Xander jerked me up off the ground and began inspecting me for potentially fatal wounds. Elias kept on running, headed for the projectile's point of origin. Once he ascertained that my death wasn't imminent, Xander took off in the same direction. His weapon was out, and he was closing the distance between himself and Elias. They vanished around the corner of a house further down the street. One of Melas's less friendly neighbors? I hadn't picked this for a rough neighborhood. It was an older neighborhood but not run down or dying. People around here cared about their homes and gardens.

I helped Marika up off the ground. "Are you okay?"

"Do I look okay?"

She looked dazed was how she looked. I probably had the same stunned look in my eyes.

“You’re not dead or bleeding.”

“Then I am okay. What happened?”

“Someone shot a missile or something at us. Come on, we’ve got to go before Melas and Hera spot us.”

We both looked at the moped’s burning skeleton. The spiraling black smoke had to be doing a number on the ozone layer.

“Go where?” she asked.

There was only one way out of here that wasn’t on foot, and that was Elias and Xander’s ride. “The car,” I said.

“You mean steal it?”

“No, I mean get in it and hide.”

“Oh.” She sounded disappointed. “I have never stolen a car before.”

“What about the Ferrari in Naples?”

“That was different because the boy stole it. If we steal a car together we will be like Thelma and Louise.”

“They didn’t steal the car. It belonged to Louise.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Because that is not how I remember it. Maybe they showed a different version here.”

“They don’t just do that.”

“Are you sure?”

Further down the street, Hera was making her appearance. She’d stopped to dress ... more or less. Definitely less. She was in her underwear, gun in the upright and deadly position. Lucky for us her head was turned the other way. I grabbed Marika’s arm. “To the car. Now.”

A split second later, we dived into the black bullet. Somehow I ended up in the backseat. Again. And Marika was riding shotgun.

We watched Hera pace the sidewalk outside Melas’s place. A moment later, Melas appeared at her side, buttoning his shirt.

My heart fell into my aunt’s sandals. I looked away.

“Does something about Nikos seem strange to you?” Marika asked thoughtfully.

“Strange how?”

“Strange like he lost some weight and shrunk a little bit. Does he wear lifts in his shoes, do you think?”

I sneaked a peek. Now that she’d brought it up, Melas didn’t seem like himself.

I grabbed my phone, dialed his number.

He picked up on the third ring. “Melas,” he said.

The man with his back to me hadn't touched his phone.

I stared. I thought about it—hard.

"Where are you?" I asked Melas.

"At my desk," he said. "Why? Everything okay?" His voice warmed up. "You want to grab dinner with me tonight?"

"So you're not at your house?"

"No. What's going on?" Now he sounded suspicious, and rightly so.

"Mistaken identity. As you were, Detective."

I hung up before he could fire another question.

"That's not Detective Melas," I told Marika.

She inspected not-Melas. "He looks like Melas."

Now that I was getting a good look at Pretend Melas I could see the cracks in the facade. Body a touch less beef, a little more cake. Narrower shoulders. Flatter butt. But from a distance—say, from across the street or maybe in a darkened bedroom—he could be Melas.

"Ew," I said, considering what Hera had done, and in Melas's own house.

Marika's head bobbed up and down. "There is something wrong with that woman. We should shoot her."

"We can't just shoot her."

"Takis could. I could ask him ..."

"Maybe some other time."

Xander and Elias reappeared empty-handed a few minutes later. They snuck up from the back, avoiding Hera and Faux Melas. I'd managed to convince Marika to change the station to something current and boppy with less volume. Xander didn't look happy. Was that because he hadn't caught his man or because of the change in the music situation?

He yanked the passenger door open, hauled Marika out, planted her in the backseat next to me.

"Welcome to where all the cool people who like good music and hate bad music sit," I told her.

"This is not fair," she said. "I get car sick."

"You don't get car sick."

"I do now."

Xander reached over and sent me straight to musical hell with one twiddle of the sound system button.

"Did you guys find the shooter?"

Elias swiveled in his seat. "No." He turned back around.

"That's it?"

"Yes."

I tapped Xander on the shoulder. "What's his problem?"

Xander ignored me. He twisted the key in the ignition and

performed a U-turn. His gaze met mine in the rearview mirror; although it's possible he was trying to see out the back and past my head.

Suddenly Marika yelled, "Stop!"

Xander hit the brakes. We all snapped forward then slammed back into our seats.

Marika rolled the window down, stuck her head out, and barfed slop all over the road. Then she rolled the window back up. She dabbed her lips with a tissue.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Now I am hungry," she said. "Where are we stopping for lunch?"

We all looked at her in horror.

"No lunch," I said.

"Yes, lunch. It is the law. Employees must have a lunch break, and I am an employee."

"I don't think that's how it works in organized crime."

She swiveled in her seat to look at me. "Is there a union?"

I shrugged.

"No," Elias said, his voice low and disbelieving. "No union."

Xander hit the gas. He didn't stop until we reached the compound.

I couldn't help myself—I needed a shower and I needed one now. How did widows do it? All that black, it was like being stuffed into a witch's oven in a candy cane house. Back in Grandma's shack, I peeled away the damp layers. I looked down ... and shrieked.

The inside of my thighs were black. So much for fast-drying paint.

I called Aunt Rita. "How do I remove black paint off the inside of my thighs?"

"I'll be right there."

Five minutes later, Aunt Rita rocked in wearing strappy sandals, hot pants, and a sparkly halter. In one hand she carried a bottle of something a dubious shade of orange.

"Will it work?" I asked, eyeing the bottle. My knowledge of the Greek language didn't extend to automotive and home renovation products.

"The cousins say yes."

Color me doubtful. "Will it work on people or just on inanimate objects? Because there's a difference."

"There is only one way to find out," she said, ferreting around under Grandma's sink. She pulled out a cleaning cloth and handed it to me along with the bottle. "If it eats through your skin, I know an excellent plastic surgeon."

That wasn't the least bit reassuring.

But it did work, and I didn't lose too much skin. Mostly it was like a rough chemical exfoliation. In some tax brackets, women paid a fortune to slough this much skin off their faces.

Bow-legged, I joined my aunt in the kitchen. She'd scrounged up a tin container with a vanilla flower on the label. While I was in the shower, she had poured two tall glasses of iced water. She looked up in time to see the question on my face.

"Vanilla mastic," she said.

I might have clapped my hands and squealed a bit. "Vanilla submarines? Melas told me about them."

"They are a rite of Greek childhood. Nothing rots more baby teeth."

"Do I look like I care right now? Hand it over and no one gets hurt."

Laughing (the sound like a bag of rocks in a cement mixer), she gave me one of the glasses. The other she kept for herself. We stood in Grandma's crappy kitchen, in her crappy shack, sucking vanilla mastic off a spoon. It wasn't heaven but it was on the same street.

Aunt Rita was watching me, a curious look on her face.

"What is it?" I asked her.

"What do you think of my brother?"

"Uncle Kostas?" I shrugged. "I don't really know him."

"Do you trust him?"

The answer rolled out easily. "No."

"Neither do I." She leaned forward and kissed me on the forehead. "You watch out for yourself, and I will watch him, okay?"

"Hahahahaha-No."

That resounding laughter punctuated with the exact word I didn't want to hear had just fallen out of the mouth of one of my interchangeable cousins manning the garage. I asked for another vehicle and what did I get?

Sarcasm.

Could be Greeks invented sarcasm, but that didn't mean they got to sharpen their sarcasm skills on me.

"Fine." I rattled my key ring. "Then I guess I'll just take the Beetle."

"Good choice," he said. "You should do that."

"I will."

"Perfect."

"Right now."

“Okay. Where are you going?”

“Wherever I want.”

“Does Baboulas know?” He caught sight of Elias slinking into the garage behind me. Elias saluted him and hopped into his usual black car, waiting for me to take off. “Never mind,” my cousin said. “Elias is with you.”

“Keep it up,” I said, “and I’ll tell Grandma you smoke near her cars.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I might.”

“She’d kill me.”

“She might.”

“Think of me when you drive over my speed bump, eh?”

“I will.”

I hopped into the Beetle, gave Elias a wave, and turned the key. Before I risked picking up Hera’s trail again—which, let’s face it, wouldn’t be that difficult—I wanted to know who’d shot a rocket at Aunt Rita’s moped and why. Elias and Xander’s reactions had been cavalier, to say the least.

Granted, my experience with rocket launchers was limited, but I only knew of one person in the area who owned one and liked setting things—and people—on fire.

Chapter 18

MY POINTER FINGER shot into the accusatory position. “Know anything about a flaming projectile that was shot at me earlier today?”

“Who, me? I know nothing about nothing.”

The guy who knew nothing about nothing (which, grammatically speaking, meant he knew everything about everything) was Baby Dimitri, Godfather of the Night, shoe and souvenir salesman, and Donk’s uncle. Godfathers of the night deal with the kind of crimes that blossom in darkness ... although Baby Dimitri didn’t mind dipping his toe into the lighter hours, as long as it was profitable. The scrawny, aging gangster dresses for Florida in the 1960s, keeps his hair tamed with slime, and spends most of his time parked in a chair outside his shop. A chair he was in right now.

“Come on. You know everything about everything.”

Serious hand waving ensued. “No. I like to pretend I know everything. That way people have no idea what I do know and what I don’t know.” His reply was negative but I could tell he was pleased. My accusation meant his act was working.

I stuck my head in his shop and glanced around, taking stock of his, well, stock. Baby Dimitri carried a shoe for every foot and a souvenir for everyone who has ever dreamed of spending too much on a cheaply made trinket with GREECE scribbled across the front.

“Is any of this stuff made in Greece?”

He went *tst*. “Too expensive. It is cheaper to buy Chinese and import.”

“I can’t even imagine why Greece is circling the drain,” I mumbled.

“Politicians and bankers bent Greece over and gave her something she would never forget.”

“Her? Are you sure about that? Because Greece has a reputation and historical precedent for certain male proclivities ...”

He stared at me for a moment, a curious expression on his face. I couldn’t figure out if he wanted to have me killed or make me do a jig. Then he laughed.

“And you say you do not want to be Baboulas.” He grabbed my face with both hands and shook my head vigorously from side to side. “You are already your grandmother, but with smaller breasts and a bigger ass.”

“Mine are smaller, seriously?” That was a bit of good news,

because looking at Grandma I thought my future was destined to be saggy.

He made a face and let me go. “She was something, in her time.”

I stuck my head back into his shop again. Scratched my head. Readjusted my ponytail. “Gee, I just realized what’s missing in this picture. Laki. Where is Laki?”

Shrug. “Who knows where that *malakas* is?”

“You?”

He laughed. “Laki is his own man. He comes and goes as he pleases.”

I highly doubted that. Laki was Baby Dimitri’s right-hand man, and probably his left. “He been setting any fires lately, say, to any mopeds?”

“Mopeds ... what mopeds? Why are you obsessed with fire and missiles? If you look I bet you will find Laki playing *tavli* with the rest of the stupid old men.”

“I doubt that,” I muttered. I recounted the tale of the exploding, formerly pink moped, with a few edits.

Baby Dimitri shook his head slowly.

“Katerina ... today, maybe you were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Most of the world is out to get you, but not all of it. Could be the shooter was aiming for something else and missed.”

“What do you know?”

“I already told you.” He grinned, wide and sharklike. “I know nothing about nothing.”

“Which means you know everything about everything.”

He waved a hand at me. “Semantics.”

“No—logic.”

“Get out of here, Mr. Spock. You are bad for my business.” He winked and settled back down in his chair, legs crossed, a smile on his face.

Logic, and Baby Dimitri’s mouth, had told me that Laki was the guy behind the rocket launcher that had blasted Aunt Rita’s moped off the planet. But why? We liked each other, in a grudging, distantly respectful way. Laki seemed like the kind of guy who’d consider it rude to shoot at me. Very Hannibal Lecter of him.

Unless, like Baby Dimitri suggested, it wasn’t about me.

Marika, then?

No. Marika was Marika. When she wasn’t fumbling the bodyguard job she was a housewife and a mother. The only people plotting her murder were her husband and kids—and only when she made them

pick up their towels and reminded them wipe properly.

Maybe the shooter hated mopeds.

Unless Laki had missed his target. That didn't seem like Laki.

But considering the possibility that he did miss his target—accidentally or purpose—what or who was his real target?

There were two candidates, only one of them was appealing: Detective Melas or Hera. Blasting Hera off the face of the earth wasn't the worst idea I'd ever heard. I'd probably laugh for just a week or so, and maybe I'd walk the family dogs over her grave and let them pee all over it. But I wouldn't be bitter or anything.

She and Melas were both strong potentials. A policeman and an NIS agent. Not difficult to imagine why either of them would be on a criminal's radar.

So which one was it?

This was all assuming Laki was the shooter and I wasn't the target.

My phone chose that moment to vibrate. I glanced at the screen. The blood in my face made a run for it.

Under the grapevine's shade, the Kyria Mela said, "It was the person following you. They were the target, not you."

That reassuring—yet not at all reassuring—statement emerged from one of the most terrifying mouths on the planet. But desperate times called for desperate measures. Having a missile or rocket or any kind of projectile shot up your butt is definitely a desperate situation. So here I was drinking coffee with Kyria Mela at her request.

On purpose.

Latent masochistic tendencies, perhaps.

She'd called and I'd hoofed it back up the mountain, shivering in my sandals.

I leaned forward, peered into her good china. "That's in the cup?"

"Everything is in the cup."

"Where is my father?"

"Except that. Not in your cup, anyway. In another cup ... maybe."

"Whose cup?"

"I do not know."

"Couldn't you look in my cup and find out whose cup?"

Her stare was loaded with more than a hint of disbelief. Her stare said I was a dumb ass. "It does not work that way."

Ask me, the cups weren't that awesome and helpful. Maybe that's why in Ancient Greece oracles' lives ended badly; someone always got tired of their vague "maybe, maybe not" nonsense.

"So what can you tell me?"

“There is someone following you. A dark man.”

A brown blob on the inside of a cup was a dark man? Amazing.
“Who is he?”

“How do I know?”

“The cup?”

“There is a story going around that you are pregnant.”

“No,” I yelped. “I’m not pregnant. Not even close. And especially not to your son, or anyone else’s son.”

“I know you would not be that stupid. Now tell me everything about Italy. Do not leave anything out. I will know if you do.”

Dog trainers say otherwise, but when it comes to me fear is an excellent motivator. The whole story spilled out of my mouth, and Kyria Mela mopped it all up with her ears. After, she vanished inside with my empty cup, and when she returned it was with a big smile. A smile that wasn’t for me.

Uh oh.

“Mama,” Hera squealed, rushing through the gate. She kissed Kyria Mela on both cheeks and arranged her face into the sweet, innocent angel position.

Ugh, so fake.

“Katerina,” she said, all artificial sweeteners laced with acid.
“What are you doing here?”

“Leaving.”

“Good idea. You should do that.” Her gaze reconnected with a beaming Kyria Mela. “Can you read my cup for me? I understand if you don’t have time right now.” She fished around in her bag. “Look, I brought you a gift.”

I didn’t stick around to see what kinds of hostess gift snakes give, but I managed to catch Kyria Mela’s gasp of delight.

On the safe side of the gate, I spotted a stone. My toe reached for it. I kicked it down the cobbled street, around sheep droppings, between tourists, to the crossroads that branched off in four directions.

I glanced down the road to my right and spotted Makria’s lone priest hurrying toward me.

“Katerina!” he boomed in his cheerful voice. Father Harry is a big man with—as far as I can tell—small ambitions. Being in possession of a tiny, devoted flock suits the long bearded Greek Orthodox priest. He adores Grandma, and now—by, I suspect, default—he adores me.

After casting a longing glance over my shoulder, I rushed over to see how I could help Makria’s only priest. Antiperspirant, perhaps? A towel to mop up the sweat? Greek Orthodox clergymen spend their days (and possibly their nights) clad in black cassocks and stovepipe hats. Father Harry’s cassock looked damp enough to squeeze a full

glass of eau de pappas; *pappas* being the Greek word for priest.

I greeted the priest, forgoing the ring kissing. God and I were still on the outs. These days I found more comfort and less ambiguity in philosophy. Was I a brain in a vat? Could be. I was okay with that as long as I didn't think about it too hard.

"How is Kyria Katerina?" he asked, not seeming to mind one bit that I broke tradition on the ring kissing thing. Mind you, a few days ago I'd saved him from a dirty Portland cop with his nose wedged up Winkler's German schnitzel, so probably I had some spiritual wiggle room as far as Father Harry was concerned.

I assured him that Grandma would live another day, and hopefully a lot more after that one. I didn't mention the table-dancing incident, in case it affected her standing with The Big Guy.

"Your grandmother ... what a woman," he said, beaming. "Have you given any thought ...?" He prattled on, but my eyes were on Hera, who was done with Melas's mother and was now pulling out of the village in her cutesy little car.

My phone buzzed.

Grandma. I'd been summoned to the hospital once again.

"I have to go, but I'll definitely keep that in mind," I told Father Harry without the slightest clue what I'd just signed up for.

Grandma was holding court with two of her three kids this time. Dad, of course, was missing in more ways than one. Aunt Rita had found time to go full glamor girl in a sparkly sleeveless jumpsuit and a Farrah Fawcett flip. I'd noticed she tended to gravitate toward the seventies, when disco and its queens were cool.

I told Grandma about the flaming moped, but she nodded like she already knew, which she probably did.

"I need *koulourakia*," she said.

If there was one thing Grandma didn't like to waste it was time. Probably because at her age, sick or not, time was a dwindling resource.

"Okay ..." I said. "Good to know."

Everyone was looking at me. Aunt Rita shrugged. "I don't bake," she said.

"I don't bake either. I'm just Grandma's helper!"

"How hard can it be?" Uncle Kostas said.

"You're not in this conversation," I told him. "Don't you have somewhere to be? Alleys to pee in? Guns to dump in garbage cans?"

"Katerina," Grandma said in a dangerous sort of voice.

He shrugged off my half-assed interrogation. "I figured I would stick around for a while, maybe help find my brother."

"The recipe is easy." Grandma paused, and looked me up and down, paying particular attention to my apparently useless hands.

“Ask Marika to help you. She knows the recipe. Not my recipe, but hers is almost as good as mine.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “You want some herbal additives?”

“Of course, or I would not ask you to bake anything. You are not ready to be unleashed on a kitchen yet—not my kitchen.”

Grandma was right, of course. I had the watching thing, and the stirring when I was told to stir thing down pat. But putting Greek cookies together from scratch, without an idiot-proof recipe? Forget about it. American cookies were easy, but Grandma’s pot cookies weren’t exactly chocolate chip.

“Where am I supposed to get the ... you know ... green stuff?”

“Takis will give you what you need.”

Takis. Great. “Anything else?”

“Just the *koulourakia*.” Grandma winced, reminding me that she wasn’t just a high-ranking gangster, she was also a sick old lady. Throwing together pot cookies wasn’t in my skill set, but I could learn. I mean it wasn’t like she was going to be selling them to children, like her other drugs. This was a sort of moral gray area for me, what with Nancy Reagan doing her pre-mortem ‘drugs are bad, mmkay?’ routine in my head, and Oregon’s new pro-marijuana laws, ensuring that it was perfectly okay to be weird and high in Oregon.

I kissed Grandma on both cheeks, waved at my uncle, and was about to hug the stuffing out of Aunt Rita, when she said, “Let me walk you to the elevator,” and looped her arm through mine. It was just us two girls.

“My eyes fourteen,” she said, which was a Greek saying that meant she was on the lookout for trouble, not that she mutant arachnid. “Everywhere my brother goes, I am watching him.”

“Uncover anything interesting yet?”

She made a face. “He pees a lot.”

“I noticed that. Urinary tract infection?”

“Maybe it is a big stick tickling his prostate.”

The elevator doors parted. Xander stepped out. Takis was with him.

“Katerina,” Takis said. “Baboulas has something for you. Let’s go.”

I hesitated, as one does when they hear a notorious crime lord’s henchman wants to give them something. “Do you mean the you-know-what?”

“If the you-know-what is you-know-what, then yes.”

Xander held the elevator door for us. Takis and I left; Aunt Rita and Xander stayed. Aunt Rita got the better deal.

Down in the parking lot, Takis wiggled his fingers at me. “Keys.”

“You’re not driving my car.”

“It’s not your car. It belongs to Baboulas.”

Technically yes, but also no. "Mine."

"Fine," he said like I was killing him, "but if we are overtaken by donkeys it will be your fault."

"I don't drive that slow," I muttered.

"Tell it to that old lady," he said as I pulled out of the driveway. The old woman in question was using a walker decked out with black streamers to add an extra layer of outward devotion to her status as a widow.

"What are you stopping for?" he barked.

"Red light."

"Red light," he said, disgusted. "Who stops at red lights?"

"People who don't want to die?"

"People who don't have any place better to be than stuck in traffic. Go up on the sidewalk."

"I'm not driving on the sidewalk."

"Why not? Are you too good for the sidewalk? Just drive up on the sidewalk."

"I'm not driving on the sidewalk. There are people walking up there."

"Not for long," he said, and yanked the wheel. The Beetle jumped the curb, landing the two passenger's side tires squarely on the sidewalk. People scattered. I slammed on the brakes. The smell of burning rubber wafted out from the undercarriage.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I demanded.

"Me?" He shrugged. "Nothing. What is wrong with you? Why did you stop? Now even the traffic that was stopped before is overtaking us." He leaned back against the Beetle's seat and adjusted his sunglasses a shade too casually.

What was he up to? People like Takis are always up to something. They've got cunning and shenanigans stitched into their genes.

Swiveling in the driver's seat, I took stock of my surroundings, looking for glints of light sparking off nefarious things like cameras and other assorted objects made in China for the sole purpose of spying on people like me, who were minding their own business and stopping lawfully at red lights.

"What?" Takis said.

"Hmm ..."

The only thing familiar was Elias behind me in his usual ride. Smart guy, he hadn't followed me onto the sidewalk.

Elias stuck his head out the window. "You okay?"

I gave him two thumbs up and hoped it wasn't an obscure Greek insult.

"I think you're up to something," I told Takis.

"Who me? What am I up to? I am doing as I was told: taking you

to get something Baboulas wants you to have. Keep up the paranoia, you will be Baboulas in no time.” He looked at me. “Don’t you want to hit me or anything?”

“It’s too hot,” I said. “I don’t want to break a sweat.” Or give anyone a photo op. Takis was definitely up to something.

It was slow going through the city. Greece was waking up from its afternoon nap. Traffic was taking to the streets. When we reached the compound driveway, Takis told me to take a left before the gates. Until now I hadn’t paid any attention to the road that scooted around the wall, vanishing between the trees.

“What’s back here?”

“Farm,” he said.

A little bell began to tinkle in my head. “I know that, but what’s at the farm?”

“Farm things.”

I knew two things about the family farm. One, that’s where the compound’s meat and produce originated. And two, somewhere on the premises was the Makris Family armory. Yes, I was a little bit obsessed with the idea of a giant horde of guns and ammo, especially after Xander had led me to believe the entire pitiful arsenal was concealed in the cramped root cellar beneath the conservatory. Marika had let it slip that the Family was armed to the teeth, and that the hiding place was located at the farm.

“Do you mean guns?”

Takis snorted. “Guns. Where do you get these ideas?”

“Are you going to shoot me?”

“Like I said: paranoid. Baboulas told me to give you the baking ingredients.”

“You mean cannabis?”

He sat bolt upright. “I mean keep your mouth shut, eh? You never know who is listening.”

“You’re right,” I said, “I never know.” But I bet he did. It wouldn’t be the first time my car was bugged.

I angled the Beetle around the narrow, pocked road, branches taking stabs at us as we sliced between the trees. Walking with Uncle Kostas we’d come at the farm from a different direction. This time I was greeting it head on.

Last time I caught sight of chicken coops and piles of poop. This time, the main structures. If you could call them that. Compared to these barns, Grandma’s shack was palatial. Roughly hewn stone had crawled into drunken heaps and made inebriated efforts at jamming hats of reddish tile onto their heads. In a nearby field I witnessed a living violation; in Greece, it seemed, you could put a cart before the horse. Used to neat American bales, I was surprised to see hay

bundled into tall shapes that looked like they could hide a human body. Goats milled around hay sandwiched between two rickety picket fences. Gangs of chickens roamed, beaks stabbing at the parched ground. Nowhere did I see signs of an arsenal.

I did see donkeys though, which was pretty cool. These ones were grouped under sparse trees that leaned away from the farm, perhaps wishing they could uproot and move someplace more tree friendly, like Mordor.

“Aww, donkeys,” I said.

“You should go pet one.” Takis smiled. It was the smile of someone who knew if I went over there I’d get a literal ass kicking.

“You first.”

“I already did. Why do you think I married Marika?” He pointed to his thick skull. “Come.”

The farmers were cousins and other assorted relatives—I could tell by their noses—dedicated to the art of smoking and sucking down coffee while huddled around a backgammon board. One thing was maybe, possibly certain: I hadn’t met this branch of the Makris family tree.

Takis took off toward the backgammon game in progress. The tableau looked more like a sociology experiment than a friendly board game. Voices were raised; fists were at the end of their wrists, waiting for an opportunity to swing. The air was thick with curses. Nobody’s mother was sacred. Self-love was a recurring theme, with or without the other guy’s mother.

Takis cleared his throat.

He cleared it a second time.

A third.

“For crying out loud,” I muttered in English, and stomped over to the players, who were huddled under a narrow ledge of shade, courtesy of the wonky roof. They didn’t look up. At first.

I tossed what I hoped was a figurative cat at the equally figurative pigeons.

“Baboulas sent us,” I said.

That got their attention, but not in the way I hoped. “Look,” one of them said, “it is the girl from YouTube. Would you like a chair to stand on? Let us know if you are going to yell so we can put the animals away.”

I was vaguely aware of Takis peeling himself away from my side. Probably he wanted to distance himself from me. I flipped the backgammon board over. Black and white game tokens rained on the ground. Grown men wept.

“What did you do that for?” one of the cousins cried out.

Churchill may or may not have said it best when he said, “This is

the sort of bloody nonsense up with which I will not put". But whether he said it or not, one thing was certain: he never had to say it in Greek. So I didn't say it, but I was thinking it.

Someone whistled.

Takis was back. He shook a bulging manila envelope at me.

"Let's go," he said.

"But—" I looked at the farmers, at the board on the ground.

"No. No but."

"I should help—"

"No helping," he said, "only leaving."

"Well," I said brightly, "it sure was nice to meet you all."

Back in the car Takis said, "It sure was nice to meet you," in a mocking voice.

"I was being polite."

"We don't have to be polite to them."

My mother raised me to be polite to everyone, unless they're not being polite to me. "Why not?"

"Have you seen them at family parties?"

I didn't need to think about it too hard. "No."

"Exactly."

"Are you saying they're not loyal to Grandma?"

"Of course they are loyal. She would kill them if they weren't. They are farmers." He said farmers like he'd scraped the word off the bottom of his shoe after walking through a bar at closing time.

"Are you ... prejudiced against farmers?"

"I don't trust anyone who prefers the company of farm animals."

A light came on in my head. "They don't like you, do they?"

"Who cares? I don't like them."

"Yeah, but they didn't like you first."

"Katerina?"

"What?"

"*Skasmos*."

That was the not-so-polite way of telling me to shut up.

I shut up. We were back at the compound anyway, and I was sitting right next to enough cannabis to put me in prison for more years than I had left. I thought it was to my credit that I didn't whimper and begin figuring out my prison name. Marika and I had worked out our aliases in Naples, but 'Cedar' didn't have that shank-between-the-ribs edge.

"Fine."

"Get out," Takis said.

"You're in my car."

He made a face and climbed out. "Marika better have some *tiganites* ready."

If anyone had fries ready for her husband, it was definitely Marika. But knowing pregnant Marika, the pile was fast dwindling.

"It's too late in the afternoon," I told him. "No fried *patates* for you."

"Fuck the Virgin Mary's donkey!" He threw the overstuffed manila envelope at me and fled the scene, leaving me holding the goods.

Goods that I was supposed to cook with.

With Takis at home and in one of his moods, I didn't think enlisting Marika's help was in anyone's best interests, least of all hers. What if she ate the cookies? So what was I supposed to do about the *koulourakia*?

Back in Grandma's kitchen, I dumped the envelope on the table and got down to the serious business of taking inventory.

Sugar. Flour. Butter. Cocoa.

Cannabis.

With those I could make something better than *koulourakia*. With those I could bake brownies.

I found a bowl and got to work.

In the Brothers Grimm's timeless story of *Little Red Riding Hood*, Little Red's grandmother is sickly, a plot device used to illustrate the power and cunning of the wolf and the heroine's altruistic, naive nature. In my story Grandma was both sickly grandmother and wolf. Also, she was the huntsman, on account of how right now she was looking at me like she wanted to lop off my head with a big rusty axe.

"What are these?" she said. "I cannot eat these. They look like *kaka*."

For the record, the only thing my brownies had in common with poop was their color; and my brownies were definitely several shades more chocolate than healthy human waste.

"Just try them," I said.

She thrust the Tupperware container at me. "I do not eat these ... *brownies*. I said *koulourakia*, Katerina. These are not *koulourakia*."

Uncle Kostas glanced up from his phone. "Just try them, Mama."

Grandma ignored him. "Take them away. Bring me what I asked for."

Wow, someone had really woken up on the wrong side of the hospital bed.

"You want one?" I asked my uncle.

He laughed. "My mother told me never to sample the product or she would make me eat wood."

"Keep talking and I will make you eat wood today," Grandma said.

They were still bickering when I left the hospital room, container tucked under my arm. I saluted Xander on the way past, then jogged down the stairs, figuring it would burn off a calorie or two of the brownie batter I'd sampled before lacing it with narcotics—although medically speaking, cannabis isn't a narcotic.

I skulked through the lobby, hunting for signs of NIS. Neither Hera nor her clowns had been around on the trip up, but—a lot like germs—just because I couldn't see them didn't mean they weren't there.

This time I saw them. This time they were scattered around the exit, their attention glued to the plastic container under my arm. MENSA wasn't about to claim me as one of their own any time soon, but even I knew NIS plus Pot Brownies spelled Very Long Prison Sentence.

Hera stepped out in front of me. The bitch made it look like ballet. She eyed the baked goods. "Are those brownies?"

Panic mode engaged. "Maybe."

"I've never had brownies."

And she never would if I could help it. "Grandma doesn't like brownies. You'd hate them."

"Let me be the judge of that." She reached for the container. I snatched it out of her reach.

"No. Bad Hera. They're Grandma's."

She made a face. "You just said she doesn't like brownies. So what are you going to do with them?"

Compost, most likely. "Eat them all and bitch about my hips."

"If I had your hips I would complain, too."

"Hey, Hera. Eat a bag of dicks."

"Oooh," she said, grinning. "They come in bags?"

"Isn't that where you found your Detective Melas lookalike?"

The smile fell off her face with a speed somewhere between alarming and hilarious. "Whatever you think you know, you know nothing."

"Keep on telling yourself that."

She snatched the brownies out from under my arm. "Mine now," she declared, popping the lid. As I stood there watching in horror, she passed them around. Intelligence agents eating pot-laced brownies. Nothing good could come out of this except a photo op, and possibly footage for Stavros and Takis' YouTube channel.

I took off at a fast clip.

"Don't you want your container back?" Hera called out.

"Keep it," I said. "It's contaminated with skank cooties now."

Chapter 19

I WAS GOING TO PRISON, for sure. As soon as Hera and her spooks crashed down from their high, they'd be coming for me.

My hands shook on the wheel.

Headlamps flashed in my rearview mirror. There was a low growl as my knotted guts twisted into a newer, colder configuration. I was done for.

No. Wait. It was just Elias.

I pulled over.

He stuck his head in the passenger side window. "Are you okay?"

"Fine. Why?"

"Because the sheep finished crossing the road five minutes ago and you haven't moved."

"What sheep?"

He shook his head at me, but his eyes were soft and concerned.

An angry line of traffic had built up behind me. Someone honked a horn. Another kind person told me to stuff my mouth with a goat's privates. A kindly bus driver left his cushy seat to describe in detail what my mother should do with the current prime minister, a priest, and three fish.

"My mother is dead," I told him, hoping for a reprieve.

"Even better!" the bus driver yelled in my face.

Elias escorted him back to the bus with the help of his little friend.

When we got back, Takis was loitering out front at the guardhouse. "Stavros is waiting for you," he told Elias.

My bodyguard's eyes slid over to me. "Need anything else?"

Very Greek the way I tilted my chin up then down to signal no. Energy-wise it was more economical than a headshake. "Enjoy your dinner."

"Do not come crying to me when you get food poisoning," Takis called out after him.

"What's wrong with you?" I said.

"Nothing."

All evidence to the contrary.

I nudged him with my elbow. "You can tell me."

He did a pouty face. "Stavros used to cook for me all the time. Now it's 'Elias this, Elias that' all the time. And who doesn't get fed now?" He stabbed his own chest with a pointy finger. "Takis, that is who."

“Doesn’t Marika feed you well enough?”

“Lately she is eating all the food. Even the boys are complaining that they have to steal if they want to eat.”

“Stealing.” Definitely Makris boys.

“They are excellent thieves already,” Takis said proudly. “In time they could be the best.”

“What about college?”

“They can still go to college. The world needs more lawyers.” Laughing, he rubbed his head. “That was a joke. Hey, you missed your boyfriend again.”

“Boyfriend?”

“The doctor. He came again—with more flowers.”

Grandma’s doctor. I didn’t need to meet him to know I wasn’t really interested. My life was a disaster zone, and I didn’t need to drag anyone else into my descent to hell. Besides, did Greek prisons even have conjugal visits?

“I’m going to jail,” I said to no one in particular.

“For what?”

I told him about the pot brownies. He laughed.

“Relax. Baboulas will never let you go to prison. Money will change hands, and maybe some people will die, but you will not see the inside of a courtroom.” He thought about it a moment. “Or the outside, unless you drive past.”

Even less reassured, I trotted back to Grandma’s shack and drowned my sorrows in iced water and an unadulterated brownie. It tasted like home, wherever that was.

Several hours passed, and I wasted every one of them. I did laps of the compound. I scrolled through my Facebook feed and Liked everything, going back weeks. Finally I logged in to the Crooked Noses message board while I waited for the NIS to come down from their high and arrest me.

There were new pictures of me, head down, ducking into the hospital with the brownies under one arm. Me arguing with Hera. And, to my horror, there were several of me down the street from Melas’s house, moments before the moped exploded.

So much for my disguise. I’d be better off just being me.

BangBang’s light was green. I wasn’t the only one up this late. I messaged him—or her.

Have you ever been to prison?

There was a long pause.

Why?

Never mind, I typed back quickly. It was a stupid question.

Not that stupid. To answer your question, yes.

Yikes. Did you do the crime?

Not the one I was detained for.

How long were you in?

Another long pause into which I stuffed a lot of paranoia. BangBang was potentially a hardened criminal, one who might whack off my head if he knew who I was. I'd already dropped one hint too many, that I knew of.

Long enough, he or she wrote.

For?

To know I'll never go back.

Did they have conjugal visits?

Not the kind anyone wants.

Yikes. I was this close to thanking BangBang and logging out when the envelope blinked again. I clicked.

Can I ask you a question?

You just did, I typed.

Winky face. Another question.

Okay.

What would you do if you discovered someone wasn't who you thought they were?

Like who?

Like anyone.

Who is this? I typed.

I have to go. But I'll be back.

The light next to BangBang's name faded to gray. They'd logged out—and fast.

Stupid phone. Stupid message board. Stupid people who couldn't just say what they mean and mean what they said.

I loaded another brownie—okay, two—onto my plate and began systematically forking pieces into my mouth. Maybe if the police came for me I'd be able to deny everything. I was, after all, eating the brownies—right? Not the same brownies, but they wouldn't know that without a microscope.

Would they send Melas?

Would he use handcuffs—and not in a good way?

I was tired. Of Greece, of the NIS, of the three-ring circus my life had become. I really wanted to go home. And I really wanted a good glass of American milk to go with these brownies. Greek milk tasted like sadness.

Before I had a chance to ferment in more misery, my phone shuddered. Incoming text message. Anonymous. Of course.

I rolled my eyes. This was so freakin' typical.

Are you still following the NIS woman?

Maybe. Who is this?

A friend.

I doubted that. *What do you want?*

To meet. Maybe we can work together.

Ha-ha. Very funny. Like I was going to charge into the night at the behest of some anonymous messenger.

Okay, so maybe I had done something similar before, but that was different.

Okay, no it wasn't.

Why? I fired back.

There was a long pause. Then: *Because I know who has your father.*

Time for my own longish pause, into which I packed a whole pile of reactions. I gnawed on my lip; pondered the veracity of the messenger's claims; wondered how I could mount the forces discreetly; wondered how I could sneak out alone, because inevitably they'd want me to come alone, because that's how this always seemed to work. Bad guys never want you to bring a buddy for emotional backup.

And this was a bad guy, I was certain. Good guys called the police. Bad guys left furtive messages dipped in catnip.

Okay, I typed back. *When and where?*

The abandoned olive factory up the mountain.

An abandoned olive factory. Of course it was an olive factory, and of course it was abandoned. That shouldn't be too creepy or smelly.

Come alone, the messenger wrote.

Because—again—that's how this always worked. And I was in luck—or maybe out of it—because with the local NIS temporarily indisposed, I wouldn't have a tail.

I suppose you'll know if I talk to anyone about this?

Yes. How did you guess?

Because that's how this always goes.

So I'm not original? Sad face.

Not even close, buddy.

I didn't go alone. I brought along Sad Kat, my widowed alter ego. The guy manning the front gate knew Katerina but he didn't know Sad Kat. Sad Kat mumbled "*kalinykta*" in a damp, gravelly voice that garnered a respectful "goodnight" in return and an immediate dismissal. Sad Kat left the compound under zero scrutiny. As Sad Kat I was invisible.

Perfect.

Sad Kat and I had transport. We'd commandeered a bicycle one of the family kids had left propped up in the courtyard. We fled slowly, carefully, rolling over stones and other assorted speed bumps designed

to test the human body for leaks. Sad Kat and I were glad we didn't have Uncle Kostas's thimble-sized bladder.

By car the factory wasn't far. By bicycle was another story. My GPS turned out to be a dirty, rotten liar, feeding me some bullcrap story about how the ride should take twenty minutes. A humid hour or so later I was near the factory grounds, Aunt Rita's widow's weeds glued to my skin. Out here in the middle of nowhereish, there was a cloying overabundance of night. The dark was too empty and too full. The silence was loud in a way it never is in the city or suburbs. The cicadas were singing about how all their noise was for the nookie.

I leaned the bicycle against the chain fence surrounding the property, and hunted for a way in that wasn't the main gate. Whoever was waiting, I wanted a look at them before they got a clear shot at me. Good thing the fence was in sorry shape. Lots of holes. Myriad gaps between the ground and chain link. I picked one and went for it, clawing my way into what could be a trespassing charge, if the land's owner was so inclined.

Shadows are nice, provided you're the one in them, not the one wondering what's lurking in their depths. I glued myself to the factory's outer wall and crept around to where I hoped the back door would be.

CRACK.

That dreadful sound?

Twig.

A bitty twig with the circumference of a pencil. Tinder dry from summer's brutal reign, the wood didn't have enough moisture to muffle its snapping when my borrowed sandal landed on it.

The noise echoed.

My throat expertly caught my breath and held it still.

You know in *The Night Before Christmas*, when nothing is stirring, not even a mouse? That's what happened. Nothing stirred, not even a mouse. The crickets and cicadas stopped to listen, for a long, awful moment. The kind of moment when anything could happen ... and might.

But then it passed, and the creepy crawlies went back to trying to get laid before dying. They lived for it; they died for it.

My breath whooshed out.

Then a witch flew down on her broomstick, cackling.

Just kidding. It was Hera and there was no broomstick, unless the stick up her butt counted.

"Gotcha," she said in English. "Thanks for the brownies."

Boy was I surprised. Of all the people I'd suspected of sending me cutesy, opaque text messages, she wasn't one of them.

"Did you eat a whole brownie?" I asked, inspecting her discretely.

She didn't strike me as high.

"Why?"

I made what I hope was an innocent face. "No reason."

"Aren't you bored with following me yet? I can print you out a copy of my schedule if you'd like. "

"You knew?"

"Of course I knew you were following me. Do you think I'm stupid? Your disguise was lame. Did you come up with it all by yourself?"

"Yes, and I had some help," I admitted.

She frowned. "Which one is it: yes, you came up with it yourself, or you had help."

"You asked if I thought you were stupid. The 'yes' was for that."

Her gun jabbed me in the head. "I can do this because I'm NIS. A regular person couldn't do this. You couldn't do this."

"I bet I could if I had a gun."

"You don't have a gun."

"True ..." Mustering up my stealth skills, I slipped my hand into the gap between my skirt and back, closed my fingers around Dad's slingshot. In a game of Rock, Paper, Scissors, a slingshot wouldn't win against any of the other items, but it didn't have to. "But I've got something not even remotely better."

I whipped out the slingshot, flipped it around, and jabbed Hera in both eyes simultaneously.

Too quickly I realized she was wearing sunglasses. Who the hell wears sunglasses at night?

Corey Hart doesn't count.

"You broke my sunglasses!" She walloped me with the butt of her sidearm again. This was getting really annoying, so I punched her. Right in the nose.

The center of her face went up like a fountain. Hera was a squirter. Blood shot out in every direction. With one hand she grabbed her nose, with the other she went on a manhunt for a tissue. The whole thing would have been more satisfying if my hand wasn't on invisible fire. Punching hurts.

After pulling out a thick wad of tissues and pressing it carefully to her nose, Hera came back to deliver seconds (or was it thirds). I was busy nursing my howling knuckles when the bitch kicked me in the shins with her stupid kitten heels, giving me even more reasons to hate those shoes with their silly, stunted stems. Kitten heels are the corgis of the shoe world, except corgis are cute and smart. No one in the history of ever has said, 'Wow, those kitten heels are sexy, useful, comfortable, and great for walking'.

"Move," she said.

I tried, I really did, but the pain dancing across my knuckles was paralyzing. Lucky for me, Hera helped me along, nudging me with her gun.

"You'd make a great shepherd," I told her. "Have you considered a career change?"

She poked me. "Keep walking."

"Did that gun come with the job or did Greece make you buy it yourself?"

"We get all the best toys given to us."

"No wonder the country is in trouble, giving free stuff to idiots."

She gave me another jab, to the ribs this time.

We threaded through the factory, which stunk to high heaven of old olive brine. It takes years—possibly decades—for a property to get over olive production. Maybe even then the best thing for it is to set the whole place on fire. Cleanse it all the way to the ground. Anyway. It stunk. And from past experience I knew the stench would linger in my hair for hours.

Apart from us, the place was empty.

"Are you here alone?" I asked.

"Never assume you're alone just because you can't see anyone watching."

Ominous. Very Big Brother. "Have you read *1984*?"

"It was the first novel I read."

"Was the second one *Animal Farm*?"

"How did you know?"

"Just a guess."

She shoved me into what had once been an office. No windows. Peeling pale green paint, the exact shade of a mental illness. Clinical depression maybe. Possibly crippling anxiety. Hope came to die in rooms this color, crushed beneath kitten heels. The sad space had one seat, an old fashioned swivel chair made of wood.

I pressed my hand to my chest, fluttered my eyelashes. "For me?"

"Sit."

Because she had the gun and the badge that gave her the authority to toss me into a cannon and fire me off the planet, I sat. Moo Face rewarded my obedience by handcuffing my narrow wrists to the chair's sturdy arms.

Then she stepped back to survey her handiwork. She smiled like I was this close to being a joke.

"Has Nikos seen your costume?"

I rolled my eyes. "Please tell me you didn't bring me here to discuss Melas."

"Your presence is a happy mistake. I'm making—what do Americans say?—lemons from lemonade."

I didn't correct her. "You didn't text me?"

"No. I would have if I thought I could get you alone. Are you ready for your debriefing now?"

"Sure. Looks like I'm not going anywhere for a while." My head quietly chewed on the influx of new information. If Hera hadn't texted me, then who was my mysterious correspondent? Were they here right now, listening and watching, or was me being detained by Hera their endgame? If that was the case, thanks for freakin' nothing.

Although ... they'd given me what I wanted in a roundabout way. It was just me and Hera in this room; questions could go two ways.

"Who's the fish you were trying to hook by sending me to Italy?" I asked her. "And what about my father? Do you know something or don't you?"

"You really are stupid. Thick in the head. I don't know what Nikos sees in you. Normally he goes for women with a brain."

"So why was he with you then?"

She spat on my feet. Classy.

"Was that an insult or were you banishing the evil eye? I'm betting it was the second one, but it's hard to tell when you're so trashy."

"I ask the questions," she said. "Start from the beginning."

"That wasn't a question."

"Pretend it was."

"The beginning ... Where I woke up in an alley in Naples, dumped there by you and your minions?"

"Not that part," she hissed. "The beginning of the important things. I know you met with Mario Fontana. What did you learn?"

"That poison ivy comes in different strains."

"What else?"

"Naples really has a garbage problem in places. They really need to get the mafia involved, because the Camorra are seriously useless when it comes to waste management."

"God, you are annoying. I sent you there for information and I know you didn't walk away empty-handed. Mario. Tell me about him."

"Every other person I met there was named Mario. You'll have to be specific."

She tossed a picture in front of me. Sure enough, there was my flamboyant host, grinning up at the photographer. His teeth were the kind of white seen in nature documentaries about Antarctica. His mesh shirt revealed a mile of oiled and bronzed chest. "This Mario."

"Maybe I met him."

"We understand you stayed at his home."

"I was kind of a prisoner. It wasn't exactly consensual."

"Did you say no?"

“No.”

“Then it was consensual.”

Not really. I’d met up with Mario with one specific goal: find information on Dad ... and maybe get something to feed the NIS to get me back home again. Meeting Mario—or someone like him—was my choice; getting dumped in Naples was not. Staying at Mario’s beachfront mansion hadn’t been optional.

“I bet you think no sometimes means yes,” I told her.

She shrugged. “Sometimes. It depends how I’m playing.”

Too much information. “Does Fake Melas like to play those games?”

“Not as much as the real one.”

Up came my hackles. Down went my self-esteem. “There’s a word for women like you.”

“Keep it up,” she said, “and the next place I send you will make Naples look like a child’s party.”

So I told her. About the warehouse, about Aldo, about the printing program he’d designed. “The police are in on it,” I said, and described the exchange that had taken place in the warehouse.

“Of course they are,” she said. “They want to live—and live well.” She nodded like maybe I’d done something okay ... but not quite good. Well if she wanted more I didn’t have it. Too damn bad.

“Your father,” she said next.

My mind went blank. “What about him?”

“You are the worm, he is the fish.”

“Why?”

“I know what you probably think, that we are trying to catch your father so that we can use him to finally sink our claws into the Great and Terrible Baboulas and bring her to a much-deserved justice—”

I raised my hand. “Actually, I wasn’t thinking that at all.”

“Oh.” She made a funny face. “What were you thinking?”

“I was contemplating earthquakes and how Greece hasn’t had one since I’ve been here. Aren’t we overdue?”

Her forehead crumpled up. “I don’t have a cool speech for that.”

“Sorry. Can’t you just make it up as you go?”

“I’m beautiful and very clever, but I’m not good at improvising. They asked me to leave improv class.”

“Too many uncomfortable silences?”

She tilted her head sideways. “You, too?”

“No.”

We stared at each other.

I said, “This is one of those uncomfortable silences you’re famous for, isn’t it?”

“I’m not famous for them, but yes.”

“Trust me, to them you’re still that creep who couldn’t act. I can see why they asked you to leave.”

“That bad?”

“So bad. I’m really uncomfortable.”

She grinned. “Good.”

Time was something I was trying to buy so I could think. Unfortunately Hera was right. In my mind the NIS wanted to wiggle me like a worm so they could catch Dad to use as bait to reel in Grandma. But in my equation Dad was the middleman—a middleman they didn’t need.

So ... what was she saying about Dad?

“I’m also thinking you’ve put on a bit of weight.” I tilted my head. “Comfort eating or stress? You can tell me.”

She crouched down in front of me, smiling a little too hard for somebody who sucked at improv. “If anything I’ve lost weight. Being in love kills my appetite.”

“I’m pretty sure being in love with yourself doesn’t have that same effect.”

A nasty grin spread itself across her face. For a moment she looked ugly. “The NIS wants Michail Makris because he’s one of ours.”

Sitting was good. Sitting meant not falling over from the shock. The cuffs helped.

“Dad is NIS? Since when?”

She shrugged one tanned shoulder. “It’s classified.”

My mind was spinning like a spin-and-puke ride at the fair. First I’d discovered Dad was the offspring of one of Greece’s most notorious mob bosses, then I found a mountain of money, alternate identities, and a gun stashed in Dad’s safe. And now this?

Keeping up was nauseating.

I thought about puking on Hera’s kitten heels, but then decided that would be a waste of good vomit.

“You didn’t know.” Her smirk reached maximum wattage. “Isn’t that delicious?”

No wonder she was so skinny. Eating people’s pain isn’t exactly filling or nutritious. “Hey, I don’t even know if it’s true yet. All I’ve got is the word of one crazy woman who is currently holding me hostage.”

“You’re not a hostage, and I’m not crazy.”

“It’s pretty crazy to strip off your clothes and hop naked into the bed of a guy who dumped you years ago, when he’s not home—and with a cheap carbon copy. Crazy, pathetic, and desperate. Poor little Hera, all you’ve got is sex, and Melas doesn’t even want that from you. I guess he’s too smart to stick it in crazy.”

“I’m not crazy!”

“Crazy.” With one finger I drew a little loop in the air by my temple. “Cuckoo. Nuts.”

“Nuts?”

“Crazy,” I explained.

“It still doesn’t change the fact that your father is one of us.” Her expression turned cunning. “What do you think Baboulas will do when she finds out?”

Have Dad skinned alive, most likely. And no, that wasn’t a euphemism. Every so often I see lists going around Facebook: copy and paste this list, then mark each thing you’ve done with an X. If Grandma were on Facebook, she’d definitely have an X next to Skin a Person Alive.

“You’re assuming she doesn’t already know.”

“Our sources say she doesn’t.”

“Our sources say she doesn’t,” I said in a mocking voice. “Who’s your source? Xander?”

Her mouth puckered up. Her tan vanished. When she recovered she was still on the light and bitter side of normal. “No. And no more guesses. I’ll never tell you.”

I rolled my eyes. “Grandma already knows there’s a leak. Everyone does. It’s not exactly a well-kept secret. I bet Grandma even knows who it is.” And probably everything Grandma fed that person was laced with bullshit. Even a kid knows to find a snitch you tell each person a different story and wait to see which one leaks out. Then—BAM—you’ve found your rat.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “We’re the best.”

Keep talking, I thought. She was giving me gold nuggets. If Hera was the NIS’s best and brightest, the rest of the department had to be potatoes.

“So the big plan is to use me to bring Dad in? Great idea. Except ... not so much. You do know he was hauled away from our house by a couple of dodgy looking guys, right? Which means he was legitimately kidnapped, which means he can’t just drop by and do whatever it is you want him to do. That’s not how kidnapping works.” I watched TV; I knew a thing or two.

She smiled. I didn’t like it when she smiled. “Was he?”

“There was a reliable witness!” Well, mostly reliable. Reggie Tubbs was a retired judge. He recognized a criminal when he saw one. Or, in this case, a couple of them.

“You mean Reginald Tubbs, your next door neighbor?”

Suddenly I didn’t like where this was going, which was really saying something given how shitty this trip had been to begin with. “What did you guys do to Mr. Tubbs? Is he okay?”

“Reginald Tubbs is fine, but he texted me a picture of his penis.”

She made a frowny face.

“Don’t feel special. He sends them to everyone.”

There was a knock at the door. The knocker didn’t hang around waiting on Hera to answer. He walked right in, already grinning in his shiny suit. I recognized him instantly as the third guy from outside Baby Dimitri’s shoe and souvenir shop. Laki had blown up his car, and Baby Dimitri had inferred that the guy was NIS. Now here he was, oozing slime.

“Did the taxpayers buy you a new car yet?” I asked him.

“A very nice one, thank you for asking,” he said smoothly. He cut to Hera. “Did you get anything out of her?”

“Wisecracks and sarcasm, mostly.”

“Don’t feel bad,” I said, “that’s what most people get out of me. Ask Grandma. She keeps telling me I’m just like my father.”

“Michail has a smart mouth,” he said. “He always did.”

Things weren’t looking good. It was one thing for Hera to make cracks about Dad being NIS, but it was another for a legitimate human being to act like he knew and Dad were pals.

My shoulders slumped. “So it’s true then, my father is NIS?”

“Oh, he’s definitely one of ours,” the guy said. He offered me his hand. “Orestis Papadimitriou.”

Was that his name or his species? I stared at his hand. Staring was the best I could manage under the circumstances. “Sorry,” I said. “Some sad, desperate loser tied me up. You know she’s a creep, right?”

He inclined his head at Hera, and after an epic amount of eye rolling she popped the cuffs off.

I rubbed my wrists. “Thanks. Are those cheap cuffs? They’re not nearly as comfortable as Detective Melas’s cuffs.”

Hera growled.

It was a low, satisfying blow. Definitely worth it. I kind of liked Hera unhinged. It made her more likely to say stupid, enlightening things.

Orestis propped himself up against the wall, legs crossed, coffee in hand. Classic cop pose. “Do you know where Michail is?”

Easy answer. The truth, too. “No. If I did I’d be back home, living my life. A life I really like. Greece is beautiful but it’s kind of like the dumb, drunk girl at the bar.”

He gnawed on that a moment, then he said, “Okay, you can go.”

Hera wheeled on him. “You can’t do that!”

“Go?” I said, dazed by the sudden plot twist. The NIS was just letting me go? That didn’t seem very NIS-ish. “Are you going to shoot me in the back as I’m running away?”

“No. We don’t shoot people in the back.”

Hera raised her hand. “We did that one time.”

“Okay,” he said, “maybe that one time. But he deserved it. And maybe one other time that I can think of. But you have nothing to worry about, Katerina.”

And yet I was still worried. Color me crazy, but the NIS didn’t exactly inspire trust.

“So I can really go?”

“Sure. Why not? Don’t believe me?” He shrugged, tossed a glance over his shoulder. “I’ll make it easy for you. We’ll go first.” He yanked open the door and waited for Hera to slip out. She didn’t look happy.

“Be careful about the company you keep,” she warned me. “Soon you will have to make a choice and pick a team.”

“Are you sure you ate the brownies?”

Worried, she looked down at her concave stomach. “Can you tell?”

Then they left me alone in the room with all my fears for company.

It took me about ten minutes to work up the guts to leave the room. I didn’t really believe they’d let me walk, not after Hera had tried to squeeze blood from this soggy stone. Peeking through the door’s narrow slit, I tried to muster some courage. A bullet could fly out of nowhere at any moment, burying itself in some vital part of me. Even if it hit like, say, a toe or something, I’d be in the kind of pain Band-Aids and a kiss couldn’t fix.

No shooters.

No flying bullets.

No NIS.

The old factory appeared to be abandoned, factory lines rusting in peace, tin roof slowly eroding, thanks to the killer combination of relentless summer heat and salty sea air. Stars peeked through the holes, creating this weird metaphor for the recent twists in my life. Someone, it seemed, was always watching me. Privacy was for other people. Not Greeks—because they didn’t seem to have any—but there were definitely people in the world who did stuff without someone recording and reporting on their every move. Instead, they did it themselves on social media.

My life used to be that way.

At least I hoped so. This whole thing with Dad being an alleged NIS agent hadn’t sunk in yet. Maybe I’d been watched my whole life and didn’t know it.

That was disturbing.

My life was disturbing. I was seriously disturbed. And existing in a constant state of whatever the hell the word was—disturbedness? disturbedosity—was exhausting. My neck hurt from all the snapping it

had to do. The back of my neck prickled constantly. Although maybe that was a heat rash or residual poison ivy ...

I found Dad's slingshot sitting on top of a filing cabinet someone had shoved out in the hallway. Not the NIS. Probably looters or kids or once-employees that rebelled on the way out of their jobs by shifting furniture. A petty, understandable action. Back when I still had a job in a building that hadn't yet been razed, I'd fantasized about dragging one coworker or another's desk into the bathrooms. We saw all kinds; bill collecting is a position with a high turnover rate. *How surprising*, said no one ever.

Next to the slingshot sat my phone, keys, lip-gloss, and Marika's pregnancy test with its accusatory pink line.

It wasn't telling me I was pregnant, but it was telling me something.

Something I didn't really want to hear.

Ugh, I hated to even put these words in the same sentence, but Hera was right about one thing (and only one thing, damn it). Eventually I would have to pick a team. Team Organized Crime or Team Law Enforcement. I couldn't call either side the good guys or the bad because, at times, they were equally shitty.

On the one hand I was a law-abiding citizen. I didn't steal and I never parked in the disabled parking spots, even before Christmas when all the regular parking places were taken. I could fly back to that life right now and live a nice, decent life.

On the other hand, I'd never had any family that weren't Mom and Dad, and then eventually just Dad. My mom had parents, but they had sucked at being people and died before they had a chance to protest against gay marriage, equal pay, and a decent minimum wage. When I finally tricked some poor guy into taking on my increasingly heavier baggage, I wanted our children to have more than just parents. I wanted them to know their messed-up, crazy Greek family.

I glanced at the stick again, tried not to touch the peed-on end. The next generation was already here, and soon it would have a new member. They didn't have to be criminals. The Family could change. It could stop cementing enemies into foundations, stuffing them into speed bumps, dumping them in woods dressed in women's underwear. The Makris Family could go legit.

If Grandma was determined to push me into the driver's seat then I could steer the unwieldy ship in that new direction.

Right?

But what about Dad? Whose side was he on? When I found my dad there would be a reckoning. Him and me. No more secrets.

Okay, maybe some secrets. But not the massive, life-altering kind.

With that thought in mind, I stuffed everything back into my

pockets and made for the exit. Hera and Orestis, I presumed, had left the main doors wide open. Very considerate of them.

Just my bad luck, Hera was there, waiting.

And she'd brought a buddy—a buddy with a gun to her head.

“Katerina Makris! How's the poison ivy rash? And where is my program?”

Not-even-remotely-Super Mario had found me, and that wasn't a good-to-see-ya smile on his face.

“THE PROGRAM? WHAT PROGRAM?” I drew a few blanks in a row.

“What program? The only program that matters,” he hissed. “My money program!”

A bright white light came on in in a dark corner my head. It was a little speck of a thing, probably LED. “You mean your counterfeiting program? It’s gone?”

“It’s gone? As if you don’t know!” Mario stomped his good foot. He was channeling the 80s in a white linen suit paired with strappy man-sandals. His injured foot—the foot I’d shot—was strapped up with Louis Vuitton tape.

“Is this a friend of yours?” Hera said in English, batting her eyelashes in Mario’s direction.

“Gay,” I said.

Her face fell as her advantage dissolved. “All the good ones are gay.”

My eyebrows rose. “Clearly you’ve never seen a pride parade. A lot of the bad ones are gay, too.”

Mario sighed. “I want to march in a pride parade but my wife won’t let me.”

Synchronized snorting was as close as Hera and I would ever get to bonding.

“Don’t laugh!” he screeched. “And stop changing the subject. Where is my program?”

“Read my lips,” I said. “I don’t have it.”

“Then who?”

I chewed on it a moment. “Seen Aldo lately?” Because I just realized I hadn’t—not since Grandma’s hospital room. Things had been hectic, making it easy to lose track of one old man with a big bag of money.

“Papa? No. Why?” He raised his gun to eye level, twisted it this way and that, peering into the shiny metal. Jiminy Cricket, was he using it as a *mirror*?

“Think about it,” I said. “Think hard.”

“Forget Papa. Where is my program? I have been following you all over, trying to figure out where you put it and who you are going to sell it to. Your life is very boring and also strange. Who dresses you?”

“Why didn’t you just ask me if I had it?”

“Why would I do that? You could just lie.”

The guy was nuttier than a jar of almond butter.

"I. Don't. Have. It. I never did!"

"Did you give it to this one?" He chuckled his chin at Hera. "I think you did. She is a spy, you know."

Like I didn't know. "The first and last time I saw your program was in Italy. The last time I saw your father was in Grandma's hospital room. He took his money and left."

"My money. Papa took *my* money."

I held up both hands, not caring that I was flashing him a double open-palmed *moutsas*. As an Italian he probably didn't know about the *moutsas* and its opinions about how his masturbatory habits had affected his brain. "Hey, I don't care whose money it was. It's nothing to do with me."

"Wrong."

Great. He was gearing up for the criminal confessional that always happens when the bad guys want to kill you but they like the sound of their voices too much to hurry up with the murder part. Probably it can get lonely talking to dead people, so they squeeze in as much talking as they can first.

"Is this where you go into a long, drawn-out soliloquy of sadness, about how you were driven to a life of crime against your will, and your father never loved you and your mother was a prostitute and it's all just so awful and now I have to die? You're my forth villain, and I have to say this confession thing you all do is getting boring."

My mouth was being a smart-ass but my circulatory system was shooting blood around my body at insane speeds. The thing about my heart is that it's chicken; it's not a fan of bad guys and their deadly weapons. Terrified on the inside, my gaze slid to Hera. I didn't look her in the eye, mostly because I didn't fancy being turned to stone. What I did was take stock of her situation, which appeared to be even more problematic than mine. At least I had a slingshot and a cellphone in my pockets. Unless she had a bazooka stowed in the lady cave, she was unarmed. Her handbag was decidedly absent, and I knew that's where she kept her zapping toy.

"Four is nothing," Hera mumbled. "Wait until you have heard dozens. Many of them in the torture room."

Mario waved his shiny gun at her. "Less soliloquy, more monologue."

"Where is Orestis?" I asked her in Greek.

Super Mario stomped his sandaled foot. "English! Tell the government agent to speak English. Don't you know it is rude to speak another language in front of people?"

"How do you know she's a government agent? Look at her. She could be a well-dressed homeless person or ... or ... a goatherd."

"I already know she belongs to Greece's spy agency. She is not a very good spy."

Hera didn't look happy, but at least her unhappiness seemed to be aimed sideways and slightly back. She still hated me—it's just that at this moment she hated Mario more.

I gave him a *hurry up* motion. "Can you get moving and do the monologue then?"

His eyes narrowed into suspicious slits. "Why?"

"I'm getting bored."

Mario let out a shoulder-shaking sigh, then got started. "My papa was terrible. He beat me. Judged me. My mother was born without a spine. Despite all that, I became successful in business. The Camorra were beginning to respect me, and not just because I married into their ranks twice. I could make money—good money, almost perfect. Do you know how rare that is? Very rare. My replicas were almost exactly like real euros. Then your uncle came on behalf of that German he works for." He spat on the ground. "He wanted the printing program."

"Uncle Kostas wanted to buy your father's program?"

"My program." He stabbed his chest with his finger. "Mine. My father only created it, that is all. The financial backing was all mine."

"You mean your wife's money?"

"My money. I saved up my allowance."

Man-child alert. "So what did he offer you instead?"

"Nothing. He skulked back to Germany without the program like a worthless Greek dog, or so I thought. But then he tried to steal it. My program! After I tried to do business like a man. He could have had it for the right price."

"I've seen the program in action, so I guess he didn't succeed."

"Funny story," Mario went on. "Very funny. Your uncle came this close to stealing the program ... and then somebody stopped him. An outsider did the job for me. Very lucky and very funny. You know who that somebody was?"

"No." I had a good idea but I wanted him to say it.

"Michail Makris. Your father." He nodded, a joyful rift opening on his face. "I asked around after you left and I discovered that Michail is not your uncle, like my papa thought. He is your father. He came and he stopped the German's lapdog from taking the program. Oh, it was beautiful. 'Brother don't do this. This is not how it's supposed to be. Dirty fake money is worse than dirty money.' Very entertaining. Until they switched to Greek, then I lost interest fast. It is no fun watching a movie without subtitles, unless there are fight scenes. And those two did not fight. Next thing I know, you show up, the third Makris, and you had no idea what was going on. I knew your grandmother would

send someone else after your father failed.”

“Wait, I’m confused. My father tried to steal the program, too?” I looked at Hera.

“Why wouldn’t we want it?” she said. “Every law enforcement agency in Europe would take us seriously if we took an axe to a notable counterfeiter’s business.”

“Notable?” Mario asked. “Is that good?”

“It means people know who you are,” I told him.

“So it’s good then.” His chest puffed up. “Everybody wanted Sexy Mario’s money program, and then somebody took it. I know that somebody is you.”

“Me?” I squeaked. “Are you crazy? I already told you I don’t have it.”

“I am not crazy!”

“Everybody keeps saying that, and yet you all keep acting crazy. I didn’t take your stupid counterfeiting program.”

“Then who?”

I resisted the urge to slap my forehead. “Once more for the people up the back: Maybe Aldo took it.”

“Papa would never take the program.”

“He took your money, didn’t he? Remember back in Italy, you told me he was going to screw you over.” I stared at him until a light bulb came on in his head. Lumens in the low double digits. Less of a bulb, more of a birthday cake candle.

“Oh,” he said, dragging the word out. “You think my papa took my money *and* my program. I did not think of that.”

“It’s not exactly a stretch. Maybe the money he took wasn’t enough.”

“It was a lot of money—more than enough for a stupid old man to live on.”

The snick of a gun butted into the conversation. Mario whipped around. He saw what I saw: Aldo advancing on us with a gun in his outstretched hand. Aldo grinned when he took stock of Mario’s little situation.

“Two pretty women, and you and that useless worm between your legs have no idea what to do with either of them. A real man could have both at the same time. In my day I would have.”

I raised my hand. “You couldn’t have had me.”

“Maybe not. But maybe yes.”

“Or me,” Hera said, arriving late to the denial party.

“A few years from now when your ass droops you will not be so picky,” Aldo said. He winked at her. She shot him a look of utter disgust.

“Perfect timing,” I told Aldo. “Maybe you can help Super Mario

here. Somebody stole his money-printing program.”

Aldo raised both eyebrows. “Oh-ho-ho. And you think it was me?”

Mario wasted no time shoving me under a fast-moving bus. “She thought it was you. I didn’t.”

“Then you are an even bigger idiot than I thought. If the program was stolen then I am the logical choice. But I don’t have the program.”

“Why the gun then?” I asked him.

Aldo moved closer. “I never said I did not steal the program. I said I do not have it. I did have it ... and now it is gone. Somebody robbed the robber, and you are going to help me get it back.”

“Me?” I said in a shrill voice. I didn’t know nuthin’ about counterfeiting programs or how to get them back.

“Let us say the thief has a big interest in swapping you for the disc, I think.”

Hera chose that moment to bust out laughing. “Criminals are so stupid—I love them. You are the reason I have a job.”

“Who is this one?” Aldo wanted to know.

“National Intelligence Service,” I told him.

“Allegedly,” Hera said. “I am not saying I am.”

NIS, I mouthed to Aldo. Hera gave me her best stink-eye, but frankly it was more smolder than stink. A C-plus at best.

“An intelligence agent. Perfect,” Aldo said, grinning. “Two useful hostages and the idiot I tried to raise.” He pulled the trigger, blasted Mario in the good foot.

Mario went down. “My sandal,” he cried. “Do you know how much these cost? And what about my foot?”

“It will heal,” his father—or not—said.

“Yes, it will heal, but I’ll have to live with the scar! Twice in one week I have been shot in the foot.”

“Men like scars,” I told Mario, not knowing if that was true or not.

His weeping paused. “Really?”

“Sure. Scars are sexy.”

Take Melas and Xander and their matching scars—although they’d both still be delicious and dangerously good-looking even if their backs were smooth.

Mario looked up at me, eyes drowning in tears. “It hurts so much.”

Aldo waved his gun, which happened automatically as he spoke. Italians and Greeks burn half their daily calories during conversations, which possibly explained why they enjoy talking so much. I’d talk more if I could eat massive portions without piling on weight, too.

“This is what I raised—a little girl,” the older Fontana man said.

Hera said, “I never cried that much.”

“Yes, but did you get shot?” Mario asked through his tears.

“Sometimes,” she said.

We all looked at her. "Tough family?" I asked.

"My sister and I did not get along."

I knew Hera's sister. Not that well—but Irini Pappas was determined to be my new best friend. Shooting her sister wasn't something I could easily picture her doing. The woman is a human kewpie doll. Still, history was filled with pretty monsters. Look at Ted Bundy.

"No wonder you're an asshole," I told her.

She shrugged. "Greek women have to be strong."

Off to the side, Aldo was busy scanning the darkness for his thief, I figured. Using his gun, he shoved his sleeve up and peered at his watch. "He should have been here by now. I texted him to let him know you were my hostage."

I scanned the area. Nothing around but night and trees, and lots of both. "Maybe he didn't get it?"

He pulled out his cellphone, stabbed at the screen with one finger, then said, "*Cazzo!* Stupid phone. It did not send the message." He stabbed around some more with the same finger. "*A fanabla!* Now I sent it to the wrong person. Wonderful. I just bribed a Nigerian prince. This business, I tell you, there are potential enemies everywhere."

"You know the Nigerian prince doesn't exist, right?" I said to him.

Aldo's nostrils flared. "Of course he exists. How else does he have my email, eh? Every week he writes, wanting to do a deal. It's a lot of money. I told him I will need to think about it, but I think I will tell him 'yes' when I get my money from the sale of the printing program."

I stared at him. The elderly folks I knew fell into two camps: those who took to modern technology like champs, and those who shouldn't be allowed near anything more sophisticated than an electrical can opener. Aldo was the second one. How he managed to design an almost flawless printing program was a mystery.

Unless he didn't design it.

I smacked my forehead. "You didn't design it, did you? The printing program, I mean."

He had the audacity to look offended. "Of course I did!"

"Gimme a break," I said. "You can't even work your phone, and you think a Nigerian prince is a potential business partner."

"He is!"

"Whose program is it really?"

One-handed, he slapped the air. "What does it matter, eh? Soon I will pass it on to the highest bidder. But first I need the program." He glanced around. It was hard to tell with all his wrinkles, but I think he was worried.

Mario looked up from his bleeding foot and ruined sandal. "Papa! You said it was your work."

“I lied. So did your mother when she told me you were my son.”

This was devolving into a domestic situation—fast.

I clicked my fingers under their noses. “So who are you waiting for? Who would swap little ol’ me for a hundred million dollars worth of software you obviously stole from some other poor sucker?”

“Me,” a voice said.

Grandma was in the house.

GRANDMA ROLLED into the puddle of light, her deadly duo at heel. Either she had too much pride to let either of them push her new wheels, or too much energy. For Grandma she looked good. Her steel hair was piled in a neat, high bun, and her black dress was crisp and new over her plastered lower half. Who was she all dressed up for? Surely not Aldo.

Xander and Takis hadn't come to the party empty-handed. They'd brought big, bullet-spitting guns. The regular sized handgun Aldo was holding suddenly looked inadequate. Mario's shiny piece wasn't faring any better.

For some reason Aldo looked more surprised than I felt. His mouth opened and closed a few times, then he managed to aim some words in Grandma's direction. "Katerina! What are you doing here, my flower?"

"Did I ask you a question? No. Why you speaking?"

Aldo opened his mouth. Grandma cut him off with a stink-eye that made Hera's earlier pitiful effort look downright friendly.

"Technically you just asked him two questions," I said.

Grandma didn't look amused. "The first one I answered for him, and the second one I do not care. Katerina, come here."

Aldo swung the gun around in a balletic arc. He was pretty spry for an old guy. Unfortunately, the gun was pointed at me again now. "No."

Grandma ignored him. "I gave you an order," she told me.

I jabbed my finger at the problem. "Gun."

"Mine are bigger," she pointed out. "Come here."

"And if he shoots me?"

"Xander and Takis will shoot his son."

"Ha-ha," Aldo said. "That little girl is not my real son. Kill him for all I care."

"Papa," Mario wailed. "This sandal is destroyed. It is irreplaceable."

Grandma scratched her nose. "Okay, I did not expect that. Let me think."

Behind the wheelchair, Takis tilted his head toward Xander. "I have no idea what anybody is saying. Just tell me when to shoot, okay?" he said in Greek.

Xander didn't speak, didn't move. Was he NIS? Wasn't he? The

man was a mystery. Mysteries were better in books and movies, where they belonged. In real life they just made scary situations scarier.

While Grandma did her thinking—which, for the record, I didn't buy for a second; Grandma had pre-thought through every scenario, guaranteed—I inched closer to Hera. She was a snake, and snakes give me the willies on a good day. But I felt bad for her. She looked scared, in over her head. I was scared, too, but fear had been my default setting lately. I was learning to function while terrified. My big plan was, if guns started firing, to get Hera out of here. An NIS agent winding up dead in Grandma's company didn't seem like it would be good for Grandma. Questions would be asked—and they'd be asked in tiny, airless rooms, where there was a lack of refreshments and pot-laced *koulourakia*. Grandma was a criminal but she was my Grandma. Save Hera, save Grandma.

"Who did you expect?" Grandma said after a moment. "Kostas? He could not be here tonight. He sent a present though. Would you like to see it?" She didn't wait for his answer. What she did do was chop both hands at her plastered groin, inviting the elderly Italian man to suck a masculine appendage she didn't own. Actually, I wasn't sure that was true. Knowing Grandma it was entirely possible that she kept mason jars filled with her enemies' severed genitals. They weren't stored in her kitchen or the root cellar under the greenhouse, but that didn't mean they didn't exist.

"Greeks give terrible gifts," Aldo said. "Ask the Trojans, they will tell you. Where is my program?"

"My program!" Mario cried. Everyone ignored him.

"Your program?" Grandma shrugged. "Who knows? Could be anywhere."

"That was the deal: your granddaughter for the program. Otherwise ... bang-bang."

"Maybe the deal you made with my son. Me, I am here for my granddaughter. Give her to me and you live—that is the new deal. That is *my* deal."

"No."

"Wait," I said. "Uncle Kostas stole the counterfeiting program from Aldo?"

"Yes," Grandma said. "That is why he was in Italy again—to acquire the program. He failed there, and so he tried again when Aldo stole the program from Mario and fled to Greece. I am impressed because Kostas was never a very good thief."

I switched to Greek. "Who did he steal it for? You or Winkler?"

"For himself," she said dryly. "Your uncle has big plans for his future."

Which, from Grandma's tone, could be very short. "Was he ever

going to be here tonight for the swap?"

Grandma looked at me. I looked back.

So, it was like that.

"Oh," I said. "Not sure what I expected, seeing as he's my uncle."

"Rita would have made the swap. Rita adores you."

"That makes me feel better."

"English!" Aldo barked.

Grandma winked at me. "Inferiority complex. Everybody who is not Greek wishes they were Greek."

I swallowed a smile.

Then Aldo fired his gun and it all went to hell.

Stavros darted out of nowhere and wheeled Grandma away. Xander and Takis charged toward Aldo, who couldn't, as it turned out, hit the side of a barn from six feet away. Mario, still on the ground crying over his sandal, ignored the ruckus. More people poured into the area, but I couldn't tell if they were on Team Grandma, Team Aldo, or some other team that wanted everyone dead.

Only Hera and I were dumb enough to be left standing there.

"Where are Orestis and the rest of your guys?" I yelled at her in Greek.

"Gone!" she whispered. Okay, so she didn't whisper but I was mostly deaf from the shooting. Me being in close proximity to weapons without suitable ear protection needed to stop.

"Then why are you here?" Realization dawned. "Jimmy Cricket, you were going to double back and kill me, weren't you?"

"Maybe a little light torture," she said. "But I admit to nothing."

"You suck," I told her.

Something got lost in the translation, because the cow grinned. "Believe me, Nikos knows."

Okay, maybe nothing got lost in translation. "I hate you."

"I hate you, too."

"I hate you too much to see you die this quickly."

"I would prefer to see you suffer, too. Ever been water boarded?"

"Not lately." Or ever.

"It's excruciating. You would be a perfect candidate."

Ugh. I wrapped my arms around her, right there on the ground. Then I rolled, and she rolled, and finally we rolled until we were in the factory, out of the direct line of fire. Hera shoved me out of the way, then jumped up and brushed the non-existent wrinkles out of her clothes. I figured she didn't sweat, she steamed, which was why her clothes existed in a state of smooth perfection.

"Time to go," she said, reaching for the same filing cabinet where I'd found my belongings earlier. She yanked open the drawer and retrieved a gun. Once again, I was standing on the wrong end of a

weapon. Sonofabitch.

I groaned. "Not you, too."

She fired.

Behind me, something suspiciously heavy slumped to the ground.

"Bad guy," she said. "But then out there they are all bad guys. Look, I don't like you, and seeing your whole family in prison would make my year. But your record is clean. Go home and stay away from Greece. There is nothing here for you except a criminal life and, eventually, hard time. And hard time in a Greek prison is harder than most."

"I can't go home. Not while my father is out there."

"The NIS can help you. Michail Makris is our asset and we want to find him. Help us put your grandmother away, go home, and we will do everything we can—and we can do a lot."

"With what? Greece is this close to broke."

She never did say. At that moment the ground shifted again. Uncle Kostas appeared behind her, gun in hand. In his shiny suit it was almost impossible to imagine him as the hobo who had helped me in Italy. Bad guys are crows: they love shiny things. Even the villain in *Ant Man* wore a shiny suit leading up to the final battle.

"What are you doing here? I thought you scuttled back to Germany with your prize," I said.

"Figured I would help my favorite niece first." He stepped around Hera and handed me his gun. I took it without thinking.

"I'm your only niece."

He laughed. "True. Now shoot her."

The gun was small but heavy in my hand.

"Katerina," Hera said, "we are the ones who can help you. You shoot me and everything changes for you. You become one of them."

She was right. This was the narrow line in the pale sand.

Uncle Kostas scoffed. "Don't listen to her. The NIS wants to destroy our family, destroy us. This one would kill us all without a second thought. That's what the NIS does. Its enemies don't always go to prison. Ask her how many of them have simply ... vanished."

I looked at Hera.

She shrugged. "A few. It happens. Bodies slip easily through cracks."

Back to Uncle Kostas. "I can't kill her. I'm not going to kill her."

"Katerina, listen to me," he said. "I know where Michail is. Shoot her and we go together to bring him home. Right now. Tonight."

Low, effective blow. He'd taken my one major weakness and used it to twist my arm. Finding Dad was the most important thing in the world to me.

"Where is he?"

“Kill the NIS woman and we will talk.”

“He’s lying,” Hera said. “He has no idea where your father is.”

He scoffed. “The NIS will tell you anything you want to hear, as long as it serves their purposes.”

“Like you?” I challenged him.

“I am your family, Katerina.” He pressed the fingertips of both hands to his chest. “I care what happens to you.”

My thoughts jumped into a boxing ring. In one corner stood the behemoth. With Hera permanently gone, Grandma would be marginally safer. Hera was gunning for Grandma—and all of us. If she were dead, the investigation might lose some steam. Hera’s death meant Uncle Kostas would lead me to Dad—if he knew where Dad was. I’d been working towards this since Takis and Stavros drugged me, kidnapped me and tossed me onto Grandma’s plane.

In the other corner stood the three-legged underdog. Hera had nothing to offer me—not really. Neither she nor the NIS knew where Dad was. Killing her would move me several spaces toward my goals. Saving her would keep me treading the same murky water.

Ugh. Why did life-or-death situations have to be so life-or-death-ish?

I stared at my uncle. “Why do you want me to kill her so badly? You want me to kill people. I don’t want to kill anybody!”

“If you want to be part of this business, sooner or later you will have to kill. Do it, Katerina, then we can get out of here and be on our way to Michail before Mama realizes we’re gone.”

Grandma. I glanced at the open door, where the battle was still in progress. Bullets flew. Insults soared. Mario wept over his ruined sandal.

“This is the world we live in,” my uncle said as the skirmish continued. “We make deals, and when the deals fail we make death. The trick is to do it before the other teams gets to you first.”

“You stole Mario and Aldo’s counterfeiting program.”

“They drove me to it. Aldo met with another buyer here in Greece, after I agreed to pay his price. He was going to double-cross me. We were to meet near the farm. Aldo never showed. But I managed to find him and the program anyway, before he gave it to the other buyer. Why pay for something when you can steal it for free?” He winked at me.

“Who was the other buyer?”

“Do you really need to ask? I thought you were smart.”

I thought about everything that had happened lately. About the untimely demise of Aunt Rita’s moped.

“Baby Dimitri?”

“Like everybody in this business, he wants to move up in the

world. Counterfeiting was going to be his ladder.”

“And yours.”

He shrugged. “As Americans say: it is what it is.”

“Why did he have Laki shoot a missile at me?”

“That was never meant for you, as I am sure you know by now. Laki missed, that is all. I was following Aldo, who was following Mario, who was following you. Which of us he was aiming for, I don’t know. Probably Aldo. Once I stole the program, he was forced to back out of his deal with Baby Dimitri. But it was never you.”

The gun felt ugly in my hand; uncomfortable and unsightly, as though I’d sprouted a gangrenous appendage. What a world I’d fallen into, where guns were fashion accessories and people talked about killing other people like it was standard operating procedure.

Dad or no Dad, it wasn’t my standard anything. Hera was a person. Maybe not a great person, but she was someone’s daughter, someone’s sister. For all I knew she even had friends she didn’t have to pay.

I laid the gun on the ground and faced my uncle.

“You’re making a mistake,” he said, expression unreadable.

“Maybe, but I don’t think so. Dad wouldn’t want me to kill anyone innocent for his sake.”

“You don’t know Michail half as well as you think you do. He would be very disappointed in you right now. Very disappointed.”

That old trick? Puh-lease. Dad might be a lot of things but his love for me had always been blindingly obvious. Now my so-called uncle was just pissing me off.

I bent down, snatched up the gun, aimed it at Uncle Kostas.

Time passed. Each second ratcheted the tension between us.

His grin slowly faded. “You are no Baboulas.”

“I don’t want to be.”

Then I pitched his own piece at his head. The handgun smacked his forehead with a dull clank. Bounced off. Landed back at my feet. He staggered backwards. Curse words fizzed out of his mouth. I kicked the gun at him, slamming it into his shins. He leaped backwards, avoiding another collision with his own weapon.

“Keep the gun,” he said, readjusting his cool. “I have plenty more where that came from. Possibly even more than Baboulas. When I see your father, I’ll say hello. He is in the last place you would expect.”

He walked away, hands deep in his pockets, whistling. The factory’s darkness swallowed him whole.

Hera turned to me with a satisfied smirk, but she was stark white beneath the artful contouring and her summer tan. “The offer stands. Come to the light side; we have *baklava* and *frappedes*.”

Baklava and iced coffee were tempting, but I couldn’t commit. Not yet.

“Just because I didn’t shoot you doesn’t mean I’ll help you. If you find out anything about my father, then we’ll talk.”

“I thought—”

“That because I didn’t kill you it meant we were going to be best friends? Allies?”

“Maybe allies,” she said. “Never friends.”

“You’re confusing basic human decency for capitulation.”

I shoved my uncle’s gun into the back of my jeans, the way I’d seen good guys and bad guys and just plain guys do on TV. If I were lucky I wouldn’t shoot myself in the ass, figuratively or literally.

“Go away,” I told her. “And stop following me.”

“Never.”

“If you don’t stop following me, I’ll start dating Melas.”

In the half-assed light, her face turned plum. “I will kill you and bury you so deep nobody ever finds you.”

“Funny. That’s exactly what the bad guys would say.” I cocked my head. “Tell me, Hera, which side are you on again?”

For once she kept her yap shut. She stalked off toward the night, as much as a person can stalk in kitten heels. Before vanishing into the shadows she glanced back and raised her middle finger. I didn’t have the energy to retaliate.

Slumped against the factory wall, I took a moment to pull myself together. It was a hasty, sloppy job, but I managed to stuff my thoughts into one container to be unpacked and examined later when there was less gunfire and more cake.

It wasn’t all doom and gloom. I had something. I had a new starting point thanks to Uncle Kostas. Maybe.

All I had to do was figure out the last place I expected Dad to be.

Outside, Team Grandma had everything under control. Aldo was trussed up like a turkey. Nobody was bleeding too much, and Mario was still too worried about his designer sandal to be much of a threat to anyone. Aldo had brought hired guns to the party, but they’d bailed before taking too many bullets for the team, leaving their dead and mostly-dead behind.

“Katerina,” Grandma barked. “Are you hurt?”

Only in my heart, but that wasn’t fatal—yet. “Not even a scratch.”

She nodded once—satisfied perhaps—and, with Stavros at her side, rolled away, back into the darkness from which she came.

Xander and Takis stuck around to clean up, the way they always did. Not me. Cake had entered my head, and now it wouldn’t leave. Problem was, Grandma’s place was all out of cake and all out of

brownies.

Lights flashed. Tires crunched over a mixture of stone and debris nature had littered over the driveway's original gravel.

"You're late to the party," I said when Melas and Police Sergeant Pappas emerged from the police cruiser.

They both stood there, hands on hips, surveying the wounded and the fallen—and by fallen I meant dead. Falling was just a side effect of the dead part.

"Who won?" Pappas wanted to know.

I looked at the dead, at the living, at the rusted out factory that used to give Greeks jobs.

"Nobody," I said.

Melas's gaze collided with mine.

Takis voice sliced through the night. "Hey, *malakes*, are you going to stand there talking about makeup and dresses with the woman or are you going to be useful?"

Shaking his head, Pappas peeled away and went to check out the situation, leaving me with Melas.

He chucked his chin at the battlefield. "What happened here?"

I thought about it. At the end of the day I could distill tonight into one word, which was good because conversation wasn't my thing right now. "Greed."

His hand found mine. He reeled me in for one of those long, full-body hugs. Something came up, but I didn't say anything; he felt too good. And at some point during the hug, the box holding all my words popped open, and I wound up telling him all about Mario, Hera, Aldo, and the NIS guy whose name sounded like something that would clear up with a ten-day course of antibiotics. What I didn't tell him was that I was certain Baby Dimitri was the program's other buyer, and that the missile that almost killed me was meant for one of the Fontanas for their treachery.

"I need my *kolos* kicked," Melas said when I was done. He brushed a kiss against my hair. "I've been working so hard to avoid Hera when I should have had my eyes and ears on you."

"Hey," I said, pulling back. "It's not your job to watch out for me. Like I keep telling Grandma, I'm an adult. Maybe I need a bodyguard or two, but I don't need babysitters. Everything I do is my choice. I chose to come out here tonight."

After an anonymous text message, the origins of which were still a mystery, I realized.

"Trouble follows you around."

I thought about it. "I don't think so. I'm looking for trouble because that's where I'll find my father. The bad guys are bees reacting to me poking their nests."

“It’s more than that. You’re Baboulas’s granddaughter and potential heir. It’s dangerous to be you.”

“It won’t always be.”

His forehead scrunched. “What do you mean?”

Not about to divulge my plans to straighten the crooked limbs in the family tree, The American in me shook my head instead of using the Greek chin tilt. “It’s late, and I need cake. Know where I can get some?”

He smiled. As always, it was devastating. No wonder Hera couldn’t let go.

“I do.”

“It’s not your mother’s place, is it?”

“Relax,” he said, “she’ll be asleep.”

Kyria Mela didn’t sleep, I suspected. She hung upside down in a dark closet, alert and waiting all night long.

There was a noise behind us. We turned around. Mario had quit his weeping, and was staring up at Melas with a hungry twinkle in his eyes.

“Oh-la-la, who is this? Come to Papa.”

Melas twitched. “Who’s the guy?”

“Italian counterfeiter.”

“Ignore the sandal,” Mario said. “Pretend this one does not have a bullet hole through the middle.”

Melas looked at me. “Does he know his foot is bleeding?”

“Right now I don’t think he cares.”

“Shock.”

“No, that’s just Mario. He thinks he’s fabulous.”

Detective Melas shook his head. “Italians.”

Chapter 22

IT HAD FINALLY HAPPENED: Grandma had lost her damn mind. Most of the family was gathered in the massive front courtyard between the tall iron gates and the arch that lead to the inner courtyard. The cars were tucked in the garage. The cats, dogs, and my one goat were snoozing in the shade. Loud, excited Greeks crammed all their words into the same space at the same time. I was pretty sure there was at least one bookie in the crowd. As I watched, I noticed all money seemed to be flowing toward Takis, who was standing on the fountain's edge, scribbling in a notebook.

The Family bookie.

Bingo.

I made my way over to him.

"Who's the favorite?" I asked.

Takis looked up from the notebook, while stuffing more cash into his pocket. The family wasn't betting in small bills; they'd brought what looked like their life savings to this event.

"Baboulas. Always Baboulas."

I raised an eyebrow. "Who's your money on?"

His grin was so greasy I almost slipped. "Papou. He has been in that thing for years." He nodded to where the three contestants were prepping for the big race, all strapped into their wheelchairs.

"Anyone put money on the other guy?"

Takis went *tst*. "His foot was shot, that is all. What for is he in a wheelchair anyway? He's a *mouni*. When they put a Band-Aid on his foot he kept crying about his shoe. What kind of man is that? Men don't care about their shoes. We lose a shoe we buy another one. Same thing when we lose a woman."

I rolled my eyes so hard I almost sprained an eyelid. "Have you talked to your wife lately?"

He shrugged. "Sure. This morning she told me to pick up my underwear and I told her she sounded like a goat."

How he'd ever convinced Marika to marry him was a mystery. Roofies, probably.

"Talk to her. Talk to her like she's someone you love."

Two palms up, he made a face. "Why? What did I do wrong?"

"Just talk to her," I said, hoping I was doing the right thing.

The contestants lined up near the fountain. When the hospital had let her go, they'd put Grandma in the equivalent of a plaster diaper. If

anyone tried pinching her on the butt they'd be in for a surprise—although I was pretty sure Grandma was past the butt-pinching days.

The NIS vans were here, along with Detective Melas. He was allowed in; the NIS had to wait on the other side of the gate. But the Family let their money pass between the bars without any trouble. Very magnanimous; I wondered if they'd let the NIS collect any winnings.

Mario belonged to law enforcement now, although there was some confusion about exactly which arm he belonged to. Both the local cops and the NIS wanted him, and I was sure Interpol would be along soon to stake their claim. His own people—the Camorra—hadn't sent anyone to issue threats if he wasn't released. To them, without his program, Mario was worthless.

As for Aldo, he'd vanished. The official story was that he'd slunk off into the night, probably bound for one of the borders. The unofficial story was that the last time I'd seen him he was flanked by Takis and Xander. Chances were excellent that Aldo was now Grandma's guest in the very nice lodgings below ground, otherwise known as the dungeon.

Aunt Rita climbed up onto the fountain's marble edge, raising a flare gun into the air. She shook her head at the three contestants, clearly unable to believe this was what they did for sport, winked at me, then fired.

They were off!

Grandma won by a prominent nose. In a fit of bitterness at being bested by someone who'd been in a wheelchair for—comparatively—five minutes, Papou reached back for his shotgun and threw it at Grandma. He missed. Instead, he nailed Mario in the face.

Mario burst into tears. "My face! Do you know what I will be wearing for my mug shot? Bruises! I hate Greece. I want to go back to Italy, where people are civilized."

Suddenly every last man, woman, and child in the family understood English with perfect clarity. Money stopped changing hands. The cheering died. A couple of hundred or so stink-eyes shot Mario in the skull. Nobody calls Greece uncivilized—nobody.

"Can I shoot him?" Takis called out.

Mario whimpered. "Not again. I am running out of toes."

Hera pressed her face to the gate's bars. "No shooting. He's ours to shoot if we want to shoot him."

I scowled at her. She flipped me off and slunk back to her van.

Melas grinned at me across the courtyard. He threaded his way through the crowd, who'd switched back to cheering, thanks to Aunt Rita's announcement that celebratory refreshments, aka: a Greek feast, would be happening in the courtyard any minute now. The band—all

family—were already tuning up.

“Hungry?” he asked me when he reached my side.

“Not really.”

He rubbed his hard, flat belly. “I’ll eat yours then.”

Clearly he’d forgotten the time someone had accidentally mixed a human penis in with the *kokoretsi* meat. Given that *kokoretsi* is made of all the gross body parts and tied to the steel spit with sheep intestines, I’d failed to see the problem, but Melas had suffered an immediate projectile reaction.

“You won’t have to. The family makes enough to feed the barbarian hordes.”

He winked. “Counting on it.”

Donk sidled up to me. He slung his arm around my shoulder, ignoring the over-protective death stares hitting him from all directions. My family isn’t big on men touching me. They have issues.

“Katerina,” Donk said. “What’s aaaaaaap?”

“The sky,” I told him.

He laughed like a donkey. Hee-haw, hee-haw. “Very funny. You are my mentor, yes?”

“I wouldn’t call it that.”

“Partner?”

“Definitely not.”

“Friend?”

“Stretching the truth.”

“Pal?”

“You tried to kill me.”

“That was weeks ago, and I was doing it to score points with my uncle. How about sex monkey?” Then he yelped.

“No,” Melas said, bending back the kid’s finger. “No sex monkey.”

“Ow! Ow! I was just going to ask Katerina what she thinks of my plan.”

I wrenched Melas’s hand away. He grinned at me. “What plan?” I asked Donk.

“When I finish school I am going to join the NIS.”

“Ha-ha,” I said. “You’re going to finish school? I thought you hated school?” Then the second part of his sentence sunk in. “The NIS? Are you crazy? Baby Dimitri will kill you!”

He gave me a jaunty wink. Your average American teenager wasn’t capable of jaunty, but Greek kids were on playing on a different level. “He can try. Maybe I’ll arrest him.”

“And your mother?”

Goodbye jauntiness. Now he was just a kid again—a worried kid. “I had not thought of that. Do you think he would hurt her?”

Baby Dimitri was a man who had allegedly killed his siblings.

Donk's mother was a half sister and, thus far, exempt from the godfather of sibling rivalry's wrath, for reasons unknown to me. And Baby Dimitri employed a crazy old man who liked to blow things up, like the Fontanas and NIS vans.

Melas clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it yet. You've still got another, what, year at school?"

"Two," Donk said. "Any advice?"

"Study hard," Melas said.

"I was thinking something more useful. A fail-safe way to cheat, maybe. Write on my hand? No. Too obvious. Shoe?"

Melas shook his head and laughed.

Donk's gaze slid to me. "Can I still follow you to see how organized crime works?"

"Uh, no?" I said.

"Awww, why not?"

I shook my head and made a beeline for the interior courtyard. Melas followed.

"NIS," I muttered. "Who would want to join the NIS on purpose?"

"He could do worse."

"Worse how?"

"The NIS isn't all bad. You're looking at them through a biased lens."

"I'm not a criminal."

"I didn't say you were." His lips twitched. They wanted to smile. "I'm talking about this rivalry between you and Hera."

"There's no rivalry."

"Yeah," he said, "there's rivalry. You both want me."

"I don't want you." Much.

"You've got nothing to worry about. Like I told you: Hera is history. Ancient history."

I opened my mouth to ask how ancient (we were in a country where history was more ancient than most) when a scream burst out of the second floor windows. Masculine voice with female pitch. I snorted, then clapped my hand over my nose. Lovely. Class was really my forte.

Melas turned to look. "Is Baboulas torturing someone already?"

"It's just Takis," I told him. "Marika just ruined what hopes and dreams he had left."

Understanding dawned on his face. "He's only finding out about the baby now?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you just tell him?"

"Because I promised her I wouldn't tell anyone."

"Congratulations," he said, grinning. "You are the first Greek in

history capable of keeping a secret.

"You want to hear another secret?"

That grin of his sprawled further. He leaned closer, the gap between us all but nonexistent. "Tell me."

Tilting my head, I let my lips skim his ear. "You're being watched," I whispered.

He pulled back, expression quizzical. "Hera?"

I shook my head slowly, putting on a grin of my own. "Possibly, but there's someone else."

"Who?"

I shrugged. "That's for me to know."

"Come on, tell me."

"Not a chance. You said it yourself; I'm the first Greek in history capable of keeping a secret. This one is too delicious to share."

He groaned. Shoved his hand through his hair. Fell back into one of the chairs scattered around the courtyard.

"Come here," he said, patting his lap.

It didn't happen. Which was too bad because I really wanted it to happen, even though I knew better. We were interrupted by one of the cousins.

"Someone here to see you, Katerina," he said.

I shot Melas's empty, denim-covered lap a longing glance. I wanted to be there.

"Who is it?" I asked my cousin.

He shrugged. "Some guy. He's out the front, talking to Baboulas."

If he was talking to Grandma surrounded by most of the family, he had to be friend not foe. Was this another one of Grandma's blind dates? I groaned at the thought.

"I'll be back in a minute," I said to Melas.

His phone beeped. He glanced at the screen, made a face that told me work needed him—and now. "Later?"

"Crime waits for no man or woman," I told him.

Melas walked with me under the arch. We parted ways on the far side, where the sun bit into the shelter. I watched him leave, wondering if we'd ever be playing for the same team. He was one of the good guys, and here I was standing with one foot in the shade.

As he reached for the car door he turned around to wave.

I raised my hand to return the gesture.

Despite my family connections, I didn't think I was a bad person. My life was up in the air right now, but eventually I'd find Dad and the dust would settle. Then I'd see if Detective Melas wanted to vacation in Portland, far away from Greek eyes and tongues. Maybe Greece wasn't the only place where anything could happen.

"Katerina," Grandma called out. "This is my doctor. He wants to

meet you.”

“In a minute,” I said without looking back.

I stood there watching the police car throwing dirt and stones. A weight lifted from my shoulders. My uncle hadn’t given me all the answers—or any of them—but he’d given me the compass. As soon as I could tear myself away from the festivities I’d make a list. One by one, no matter how long it took, I’d start with the last place I expected to find Dad, then cross off each location until I found the most important person in my world.

With or without my family.

With or without Melas.

But something told me all of them would rally to help me hunt.

We’d talked, Grandma and I, after I mentioned the brownie incident. The bag Takis had given me was filled with hemp bred with nonexistent THC. There was no high to be had in the whole batch. When I’d asked why, Grandma smiled. But it was a sad sort of smile. “Trust, Katerina. I have very little trust in people—even family. I wanted your uncle to believe my mind was cloudy.”

“And?”

“A son is a son until he gets a wife. A daughter is a daughter for the rest of her life.” She said the words in slow, careful English, probably because the Greek translation of the old saying didn’t rhyme. I understood the words and what they meant, but not what she meant by them. Riddles upon riddles. And I still didn’t know why Grandma had sent me to visit Dora Makri.

A warm feeling spread over me. I turned toward the fountain, to where Grandma had been holding court moments ago. Then she’d been smiling. She wasn’t smiling now. Nobody was.

They were all watching me.

Somebody screamed. Marika, maybe?

Overhead, the sun changed from bright, boiling white to a cooler yellow. Something was biting into my chest. This was the source of the warmth; damn Greek mosquitoes. I looked down to see a red flower pinned to the front of my dress.

Huh, I thought, *when did I put that on?* I had no recollection. You’d think I’d remember such a huge, unwieldy accessory.

I took a step toward Grandma, and then my legs buckled.

Normally falling hurts.

Not this time.

Relief swept over me as I collapsed in what I was sure was an unflattering heap. Now I could rest. Sleep had been intermittent since arriving in Greece, my dreams littered with fragments of violence.

Someone turned the volume down—way down. I could barely hear the screams or the thunder of footsteps now.

But the laughing ... that I definitely heard.

Thank you for reading *In Crime*, the fourth of Kat Makris' adventures! Want to be notified when my next book is released? Sign up for my mailing list: <http://eepurl.com/ZSeuL>. Or like my Facebook page at: [https:// www.facebook.com/alexkingbooks](https://www.facebook.com/alexkingbooks).

All my best,

Alex A. King

Also by Alex A. King

Disorganized Crime (Kat Makris #1) [Trueish Crime \(Kat Makris #2\)](#)

[Doing Crime \(Kat Makris #3\)](#)

In Crime (Kat Makris #4)

Outta Crime (Kat Makris #5) Night Crime (Kat Makris #6) Good Crime (Kat Makris #7)

Seven Days of Friday (Women of Greece #1) One and Only Sunday (Women of Greece #2)

Freedom the Impossible (Women of Greece #3) Light is the Shadow (Women of Greece #4)

No Peace in Crazy (Women of Greece #5) Summer of the Red Hotel (Women of Greece #6)

Pride and All This Prejudice

As Alex King: Lambs